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INDIA TODAY



AKHILESH YADAV

THE CHALLENGER

CAN HE DEFEAT THE MIGHTY BJP IN UTTAR PRADESH?

OC

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In the run-up to the Uttar Pradesh election, it looked like the BJP had the upper hand in India's most populous state. There was the formidable 'double-engine' government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Centre and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in the state and the BJP's untiring electoral machinery. Moreover, the Opposition in the state was fragmented and listless after back-to-back defeats in the 2017 assembly election and the 2019 Lok Sabha poll.

The rise of Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav as Chief Minister Adityanath's principal opponent is therefore a recent phenomenon. It is also a remarkable one, given how the UP election looked like a multi-cornered contest between the BJP and the rest not so long ago. Now, Akhilesh Yadav has surged ahead of Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party and the Congress's Priyanka Gandhi.

Despite being one of only two state CMs to complete a full term, Akhilesh had a rocky stint as CM until 2017. His government was dogged by allegations of corruption and lawlessness. Powerful party satraps lent weight to the insinuation that the state was being run by 'four-and-a-half CMs'. Akhilesh was finally voted out of power five years ago in a wave election built on popular discontent and public support for Prime Minister Modi's demonetisation drive. The SP's tally of 47 seats was the lowest since its inception in 1992. In the absence of a similar wave this year, the only movement in UP seems to be undercurrents. And that is what makes Akhilesh's strategy interesting to watch. For starters, he seems to have borrowed from the BJP's playbook of putting together a rainbow coalition of the sort they fielded against him in 2017—non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Scheduled Castes.

The BJP got 40 per cent of the vote share in 2017. The SP's game plan is to cobble together a coalition to get to this figure—using the same elements. It is a daunting task, given that the party garnered only 21.8 per cent of the vote in the preceding assembly election. Not only does Akhilesh face the challenge of closing the gap but also of crossing it. With this in mind and lessons from past experience, he has chosen to steer clear of tie-ups with the Congress or the BSP.

Akhilesh has also broad-based ticket distribution to move away from his core Muslim-Yadav vote base and give more seats to others. For instance, almost 27 per cent of the tickets have been given to non-Yadav OBCs. The SP scion has reached out to smaller castes like the Mauryas, Sainis and Patels, and accommo-

dated defecting ministers from the Yogi government, each a prominent representative of one of these castes. There have been overtures to the Dalits and a tie-up with Jayant Chaudhary's RLD (Rashtriya Lok Dal), which represents the Jats of western UP. Assurances like 33 per cent reservations for women in government jobs and a special task force ensuring their safety if his party is voted to power are meant to woo the female electorate.

Caste, though, is rarely mentioned upfront. Akhilesh has instead focused on aspirational issues like development and jobs. He has promised government jobs and free laptops to the youth, and free power to farmers. Also highlighted are issues like inflation and Covid mismanagement, even as he speaks of the positives in his tenure. Whatever the outcome, this election has seen the birth of a shrewd young politician who has smoothly taken over the family-run party.

The BJP regime's biggest strength in UP is that it has been able to deliver rations to the people two times a month. The ruling party's biggest drawback is what is perceived as its failure to honour its commitment to farmers. The fact that stray cattle are trampling farmers' fields is a major sore point with the agricultural community. Timely payments of the minimum support price for sugarcane is another bugbear.

Chief Minister Adityanath is seen as incorruptible, but there is a strange disconnect between him and partymen miffed at not being allowed to share the spoils of power. The party is counting on the impressive appeal of the Modi-Yogi combination to see it through to a majority.

If Akhilesh does pull off an upset on March 10, it will radically alter the political dynamics within the country and reset equations within the Opposition.

Our story, 'The Challenger', written by Group Editorial Director (Publishing) Raj Chengappa with inputs from Special Correspondent Prashant Srivastava in Lucknow, looks at how the SP chief turned the corner in UP. Chengappa and Group Photo Editor Bandeep Singh accompanied both Akhilesh and Chief Minister Adityanath on their respective campaign trails. This promises to be one nail-biter of a finish. Making it one has been Akhilesh Yadav's biggest achievement so far.



March 5, 2012



February 27, 2017

(Aroon Purie)

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Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

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AKHILESH THE CHALLENGER

Can the young Samajwadi Party chief upset the mighty BJP poll juggernaut, bring his party back to power in Lucknow on March 10?

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UPFRONT

Photos: AFP



IN THE RING US President Joe Biden (left) and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin

THE UKRAINE CRISIS

WHY INDIA SHOULD WORRY

The Ukraine crisis reflects the West's failure to establish durable structures of peace and security in Europe after the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union. The Cold War mentality has persisted, reflected in the relentless expansion of NATO eastwards to guard against a resurgent Russia, whose size, resources and military strength despite its economic weakness weigh as realities. The European Union

GUEST COLUMN

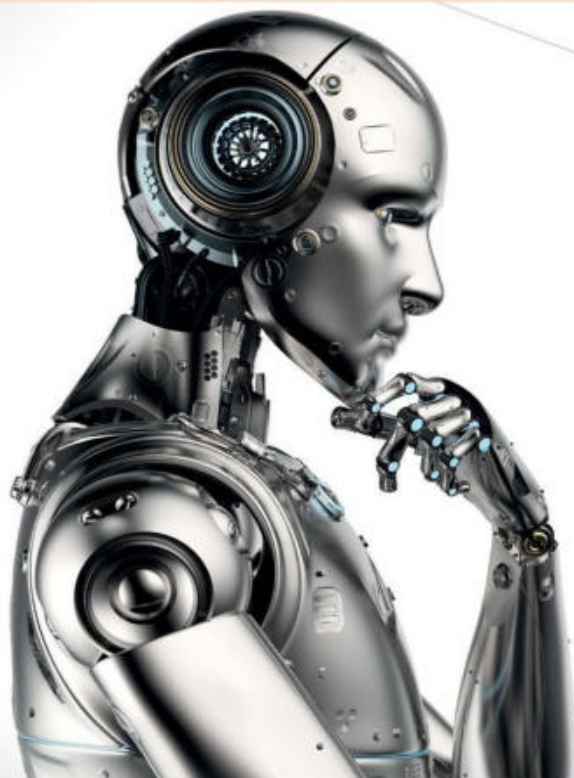


KANWAL SIBAL

(EU) too has expanded steadily eastwards as an economic barrier against Russia.

Early efforts by Boris Yeltsin and even current Russian president Vladimir Putin to affirm Russia's European vocation were rebuffed. Russia had to become a European-style democracy to be accepted as a 'European' partner. The promotion of colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, in particular, were aimed at encouraging a similar 'democratic' churn in Russia.

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The offer of NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine could not but be seen by Russia as a provocation. Russia had shown that its redlines had been crossed by intervening militarily in Georgia and recognising the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This message went unheeded and today Ukraine has paid a similar price with Russia recognising the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics, not to mention the annexation of Crimea after the ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich through street demonstrations openly supported by the US.

The arguments given by the West to justify its policies toward Russia are contestable. The only reason for adding an additional 14 members to NATO is to counter a potential Russian threat which the Baltic states and Poland openly affirm. To say that NATO is a defensive alliance and does not pose any threat to Russia defies common sense. A 'defensive' alliance pre-supposes an 'offensive' threat. Ironically, this treats Russia as a threat to NATO.

To also say that Ukraine's membership is not currently on the agenda and Putin is conjuring up a false pretext is unconvincing. Having seen phased extensions of NATO, Putin seeks binding legal guarantees against any further NATO expansion. The other argument, that entering into an alliance is the sovereign choice of countries, is fine in principle but besides the fact that 'choices' can be 'encouraged', partner countries also have a choice to say 'yes' or 'no', especially, as in this case, the geopolitical implications of saying yes can be portentous for the future.

For India, this confrontation in Europe has many negative implications in the strategic, political, economic or military domains. American power is getting overstretched by having to confront challenges at both ends of the Eurasian continent. Easing pressure on China in the Indo-Pacific could result, especially as tensions in Europe are not likely to be short-lived. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has reportedly reached out to Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi to persuade China to limit

its backing to Russia in its own longer term interest in managing ties with the US. In reality, the Ukraine crisis profits China, as it weakens Russia with further western sanctions, makes it more dependent on China and deflects US attention towards Europe, sowing some doubts in the minds of its Quad/ Asian partners about the fibre of US foreign policy at present.

India has the challenge of taking a position on the Ukraine crisis that best serves its interests. Our wide-ranging ties with the US are set to expand in ways that will boost India's rise. Russia remains a vital partner, especially in the defence and strategic sectors. The pursuit of a balanced foreign policy requires us to maintain close ties with both countries. Russia being pushed

India's position on the Ukraine crisis has to be one that best serves its interests. Talk about being pushed by the US and Europe to not "sit on the fence" is self-generating pressure

into China's arms and disturbing the balance within the Russia-Indian-China triad is against our interests.

Stronger western sanctions against Russia will further complicate our dealings with Russia, both in the military and economic domains. Dissatisfaction with our 'neutral' position will encourage anti-Indian American lobbies to press for imposition of some CAATSA sanctions on India, and controversy will be created around future 'significant' defence deals with Russia. Our plans for more investment in Russia's oil and gas sector and for development of Russia's Far East will be hampered. Payment issues will become more complex. Oil prices have already shot up, with economic implications for us as a massive

importer of oil and gas just when the country's economy is emerging from the economic impact of the pandemic.

Talk about India being pushed by the US and Europe to take a position and not "sit on the fence" is self-generating pressure. Blinken had an "honest" conversation with foreign minister S. Jaishankar at the Quad meeting in Melbourne, after which we took a carefully balanced position in the UN Security Council on January 31 and abstained on a US-moved motion. Again, on February 17, at the UNSC briefing on the implementation of the Minsk agreements, India stressed resolution through quiet and constructive diplomacy, de-escalation and taking into account the legitimate security interests of all countries.

Once again, we have kept our counsel and refused to be pushed into taking sides when, on February 21, during an emergency UNSC meeting after Russia recognised the breakaway Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, we expressed deep concern at the developments, called for restraint on all sides, a solution through diplomatic dialogue taking into account the security interests of all sides etc. We eschewed any condemnation and reference to sovereignty issues.

This is not fence-sitting but a dispassionate evaluation of the complex roots of the crisis based on India's own experience in the subcontinent. The Partition left a bitter legacy, with Pakistan, as the weaker country, seeking security in a military alliance with the US encouraged by the latter, with its political class deeply hostile toward India despite a shared heritage, and ill-treatment of minorities. Ukraine also exhibits similar features.

It is worth recalling that all the protagonists involved in the Ukraine issue have 'sat on the fence' on issues of vital Indian national interest, be it our territorial and sovereignty issues with Pakistan and China, years of terrorist onslaught against India and now handing over Afghanistan to the Taliban-Pakistan duo. ■

KANWAL SIBAL *is a former foreign secretary*

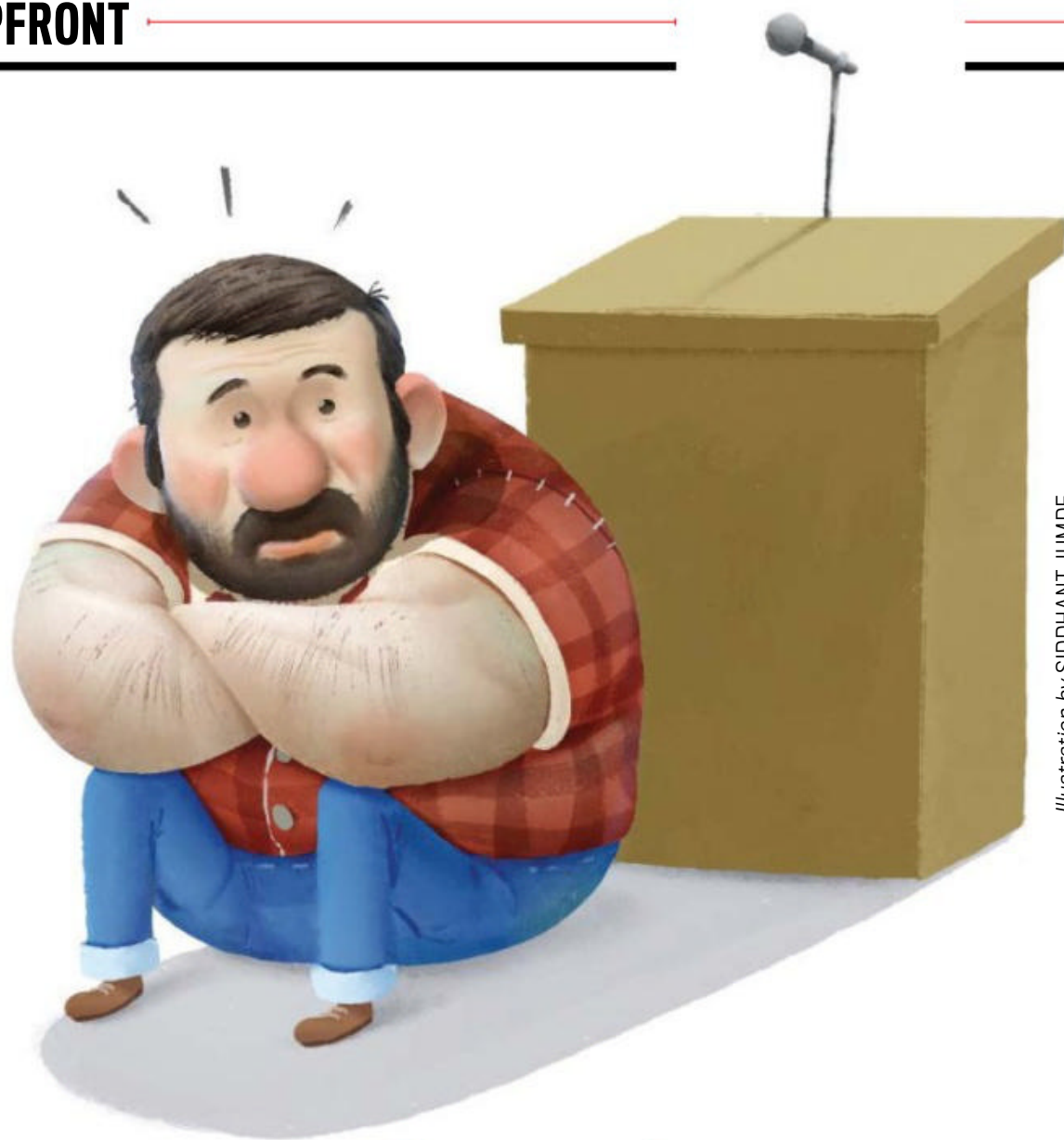


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

GLASSHOUSE

DEOL GOES AWOL

In 2019, the BJP roped in actor Sunny Deol as its Jat Sikh face, nominating him from Gurdaspur, where he defeated former (PPCC) Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee president Sunil Jakhar in the Lok Sabha election. No such luck for the assembly election. The star MP has not campaigned for the Punjab poll and even skipped Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rally in his constituency. He reportedly last visited Gurdaspur in September 2020. Stepmother Hema Malini, a two-term BJP MP from Mathura, on the other hand, has been drawing crowds at rallies in Amritsar and Maur. Star for star?

NATURAL ALLIES

When Telangana chief minister K. Chandrashekar Rao met his Maharashtra counterpart Uddhav Thackeray in Mumbai on February 21, they had two non-politicians accompanying them.

What could Tejas Thackeray (far left in picture) the CM's younger son, and South Indian movie star Prakash Raj (third from right), who was part of KCR's entourage, have in common? Thackeray Jr is a wildlife researcher and Raj a nature-lover, who recently lent his voice to a TV documentary. The connect was only natural.



BANG FOR THE MEDIA BUCK

When Maharashtra finance minister Ajit Pawar recently questioned the government's Rs 200 crore annual publicity spend, the new head of the directorate general of information and publicity (DGIPR) Deepak Kapoor began asking why. He found 42 dormant official Twitter handles his department is running. Now he wants officials to audit their Twitter and Insta posts. A social media overhaul is on its way.

ANI



Red Remix

There was a mild cheer in West Bengal's CPI(M) when the party recently eclipsed the BJP's vote share in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation election. The Left had repurposed the 'Oo Antava' item song from the Telugu hit *Pushpa* to target the ruling Trinamool Congress on corruption and extortion. The voters loved the parody. Encouraged, the CPI(M) now plans to use it for the upcoming municipal poll. It's game on.

UNACCEPTABLE CHANGE J&K
Apni Party supporters at a silent protest against the delimitation commission's draft recommendations in Srinagar, Dec. 29, 2021



KASHMIR DELIMITATION

Setting Boundaries

By Moazum Mohammad in Srinagar

For centuries, the mighty Pir Panjal range has stood as a barrier, sometimes isolating the Kashmir valley from Jammu for months together.

Though the construction in recent years has reduced the separation, this geography is part of why the region is seen as two distinct areas—Jammu and Kashmir. In that regard, some proposals in the ongoing delimitation process, including one that ties two districts in Jammu—Poonch and Rajouri—to Kashmir's Anantnag, has many questioning the rationale being applied.

On February 4, the delimitation commission—led by retired Supreme Court judge Ranjana Prakash Desai—released its second draft delimitation. Among other changes, it proposed six new seats for Jammu (Kathua, Reasi, Doda, Rajouri, Kishtwar and Samba) and one for Kashmir (Kupwara), taking

their tallies in the assembly to 43 and 47, respectively. The delimitation also departs from convention by considering geography and topography as well as population in drawing boundaries, rather than just population. In the new map, 28 constituencies have had their borders redrawn and 19 have been renamed.

The proposed changes have sparked resentment in both Jammu and Kashmir. For instance, the proposal that Jammu's Suchetgarh be dissolved and merged into R.S. Pura has triggered a wave of anger, with over 100 BJP workers resigning in protest. In Kashmir, where 10 constituencies have been renamed, the National Conference (NC) has described the renaming as an attempt “to obliterate history”. NC leader Shamima Firdous, a two-term MLA from Srinagar's Habba Kadal—which has been dissolved—points out that names are symbols of culture and

history. Habba Kadal had been named after the poetess and queen of Kashmir Habba Khatoon. The removal of such names, says Firdous, is “an assault on our history and past”.

Another contentious proposal is to merge Jammu's Rajouri and Poonch into Kashmir's Anantnag to form a new Lok Sabha constituency, Anantnag-Rajouri. The population is mostly Muslim in Rajouri (62 per cent) and almost entirely so in Poonch (90.4 per cent). Nadeem Khan, a member of the Pahari community in Poonch, says he cannot understand the logic of combining Poonch into Anantnag given the distance. He points out that it is over 300 km from one to the other via Jammu, and that the Mughal Road connecting them through Shopian remains closed for five or six months of the year. “With this in mind, we want to know the methodology [the

THE DRAFT DELIMITATION RENAMES 19 CONSTITUENCIES AND REDRAWS THE BORDERS OF 28

commission] adopted for the distribution of seats,” he says.

There are many theories swirling as to why the commission has proposed this change. Some see elements of the ‘Dixon Plan’ at play, referring to a 1950s’ proposal by United Nations representative Owen Dixon that included clubbing together Muslim-majority Rajouri and Poonch (known as the Pir Panjal region) with the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley. Others say the move is aimed at breaking the homogeneity of the Kashmir Valley polity. Though both are Muslim-majority regions, the people of the Kashmir Valley and the Pir Panjal region have different ethnic and cultural makeups and different political aspirations. Pir Panjal is populated mostly by Gujjars and Bakerwals, who make up close to 12 per cent of J&K’s population.

The areas also have notably different voter turnout rates. The voter turnout in south Kashmir remained below 10 per cent in the last election, while in Pir Panjal, it crossed 65 per cent. As a political analyst points out, this could be a decisive factor in elections. IkkJutt Jammu party president Ankur Sharma, who served as a defence lawyer in the horrific Kathua rape and murder case, dismisses this view, saying it is just a “smokescreen” to hide the BJP’s real plan of disempowering Jammu. This view—that the delimitation is aimed at further disempowering the erstwhile J&K—is palpable in Kashmir as well. There, the delimitation is being seen as an attempt to tilt the power balance to allow the BJP to instal a Hindu chief minister. And in the new scheme of things, the Gujjar and Bakerwal communities of Jammu, who despite staying close to the border have traditionally stood by New Delhi, are being seen by the BJP as an essential vote bank. ■

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THE RIGHT WAY IS THE ONLY WAY



In the previous issue, we spoke about over speeding – which is one of the most hazardous activities on Indian roads and which causes frequent accidents. This time around, we will be talking about a violation which seems like it happens every time our motorists and bikers take to the roads - going against traffic.

If you’re driving against the flow of traffic and designated lanes, then your vehicle is on what’s called “wrong side.”

The law clearly states that you should never drive on the wrong side of traffic, no matter how short a distance it is. Wrong side driving is dangerous and cannot be justified. It doesn’t matter if you are trying to save fuel or time, the risk of getting into an accident makes it wrong for any situation.

Reversing against oncoming traffic because you overshot your exit or missed a turn is also considered wrong side driving.

CONSEQUENCES OF WRONG SIDE DRIVING

Wrong-side driving can be hazardous to your safety and the safety of those around you. You are heading into oncoming traffic, which means that other vehicles will have to change lanes to bypass and avoid hitting you. This unsafe lane shift can be potentially dangerous.

When it comes to driving on the wrong side at night, many people are unaware of the dangers that can arise from doing so with your car lights on high beam. Full beam lights from both sides can blind drivers and thus increase the chances of an accident significantly.

The other possibility is that when people emerge from intersections, they usually look to the right before merging into traffic. They neglect to inspect the left side, which is completely fine! However, if there is a vehicle approaching from the wrong side, the risk of a collision increases exponentially.



Even pedestrians crossing the road tend to ignore looking on the left side since they don’t anticipate traffic coming from that direction.

To curb wrong side driving, the MoRTH has taken serious steps since 2019. The violators are handed out hefty challans (which can go up to Rs 5,000) by the traffic police. There’s also a chance of the driving license getting confiscated. Also, as per the amended Motor Vehicles Act, the offenders can even be taken to court.

In other words, by driving on the wrong side, you might not only cause a major accident but also end up spending money paying a fine.

So, be the better guy and saying NO to wrong side driving.

WAR SCRAP MATERIAL

DORMANT BUT DEADLY

By Sandeep Unnithan

On August 4, 2020, an explosion of over 2,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate ripped through a Beirut quayside, killing 220 people and triggering an earthquake measuring 3.3 on the Richter scale. The blast, later assessed as being equivalent to around 500-1,100 tonnes of TNT, was the third most devastating urban explosion after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Six months later, convoys of Indian Army trucks began snaking out of some Indian ports, among them Mumbai, Kandla and Mundra. Inside the 20- and 40-foot long containers the trucks carried were over 1,600 tonnes of war scrap—artillery rounds, rockets, bombs, grenades and mortars, most of it imported from West Asian battlefields nearly two decades ago. The convoys were part of Operation ‘Visphotak-mukt Bandargah (explosive-free ports)’, a year-long effort quietly executed in the midst of two waves of the pandemic. The objective: to safely dispose of war scrap that had the potential to cause a mini-Beirut on Indian soil. From the 1,600 tonnes of scrap collected from the ports, the army recovered nearly two tonnes of RDX and TNT. Army officials believe this to be one of the world’s largest disposals of unexploded ordnance. More importantly, they point out, it was achieved with zero casualties.

The first phase of the operation saw 55 personnel—divided into eight teams, each

CLOSE CALL Ammunition officer from CAD Pulgaon inspecting Gulf War munitions unearthed in Kandla Port, Gujarat (right); bomb disposal officer digging out a Soviet 130 mm shell at a storage facility in Mumbai





led by an ammunition technical officer—visiting various port warehouses and inland container yards across the country. Explosive-containing scrap was carefully identified at this stage. This sort of scrap was once regularly imported into India without any check, until an accident in 2004. That year, an explosion at Bhushan Steel and Strips in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, killed 10 workers who were melting down artillery shells. The MHA halted imports, and port authorities seized hundreds of container loads worth of scrap. This material was then transferred to godowns, where it lay for 16 years while the bureaucracy debated its fate.

From Mumbai alone, army teams recovered 900 tonnes of potentially explosive scrap from 16 sites, including container yards at Wadala and Sewri, near densely populated areas. In March 1993, Pakistan's ISI had smuggled two tonnes of RDX into India and used members of the Dawood Ibrahim crime syndicate to plant and trigger serial explosions in 12 locations across Mumbai, killing 257 people. Years later, it would seem, all a terrorist would have needed was to steal some scrap from a government yard to improvise an explosive device. Extracting explosives from scrap is theoretically uncomplicated, something like extracting wax from a cylinder. Properly done, the TNT can be safely steamed out, with the dissolved material strained and then dried into blocks of military-grade material. (In recent years, Iraqi and Syrian insurgents have used old artillery shells to fabricate IEDs, or improvised explosive devices). "A terrorist would not even have had to smuggle RDX into the country—it was already here," a defence official repeats.

In Beirut, the ammonium nitrate that exploded had been taken off a merchant ship six years prior, and had been left unattended in a warehouse. In India, the story was much the same—except that alarm bells continued to ring, the last being in 2019, when a CAG (Comptroller and Auditor

General of India) report identified dangerous material lying uncleared at various depots. The report noted 469 containers of hazardous waste 'lying undisposed for periods ranging from one to 17 years as on March 31, 2017.'

The explosion in Beirut provoked serious urgency and alarm among Indian officials. However, the task of sifting through hundreds of tonnes of scrap for undetonated ordnance was beyond the capabilities of the MHA's paramilitary organisations, including the army-staffed and run National Security Guard. So, in December 2020, the MHA turned to the army itself.

Between February and April 2021, Army Ordnance Corps teams from the Central Ammunition Depot (CAD) in

THE ARMY HAS RECOVERED 900 TONNES OF POTENTIALLY EXPLOSIVE SCRAP FROM MUMBAI ALONE

Pulgaon, Maharashtra, fanned out to warehouses and storage sites across the country. They painstakingly segregated and neutralised the explosives found among the hundreds of tonnes of war scrap, preparing it for transport back to CAD. A separate drill was conducted at Pulgaon to destroy the dangerous material at the facility's 1,700-acre disposal ground. The task of safely neutralising the thousands of shells and explosives was completed in February 2022.

The operation was kept secret, even within the military: "The information was closely guarded to prevent panic," explains Lt General R.K.S. Kushwaha, director general of the Ordnance Corps. While matters could have ended very differently, this time, India's cautionary tale of bureaucratic dithering fortunately had a happy ending. ■

SEXTORTION CASES

HONEYTRAPS IN THE MEWAT

By Rohit Parihar

On Monday, February 14, the Bhopal police arrested Ravin Khan and Warris Khan, both in their early 20s, from Bharatpur in Rajasthan as the main suspects in a 'sextortion' video call case filed by BJP MP and 2008 Malegaon blasts case accused Sadhvi Pragya Thakur. The MP claimed that on the night of February 6, she received a video call during the course of which the woman at the other end began taking off her clothes. Thakur disconnected the call but soon received a photograph of her and a naked woman in the same frame—followed by extortion threats.

This was no isolated incident; sextortion cases, especially those originating in Rajasthan and the Mewat region, have been on the rise in the last couple of years. On January 30, a 19-year-old model attempted suicide by jumping off the sixth floor of a hotel in Jodhpur in a case involving an attempt to honeytrap state revenue minister Ramlal Jat. The main accused in the case is Akshat Sharma, whose antecedents include a previous arrest in 2016 for running a similar racket to trap the rich and vulnerable in false rape cases. He was out on bail and was posing as an online news channel reporter for the new caper. Akshat, along with an Udaipur-based beautician, Deepaly, was using teenage models for 'assignments'. He wanted the girl who attempted suicide to seduce the minister during his official visits to Bhilwara, but she

panicked and returned to her hometown Jodhpur, where she jumped off the hotel roof after revealing to family members her plight. Akshat, meanwhile, had sent two other women posing as reporters to persuade the minister to sign a file during a public hearing in Bhilwara. When Ramlal refused, Akshat allegedly called him to suggest that he meet the two women in private. The minister says he declined the offer.

Akshat's past victims include an ex-Congress MP based in Delhi, two prominent doctors in Rajasthan and real estate developers. Meanwhile, to the surprise of many, the chief metropolitan magistrate granted Akshat and Deepaly bail while accusing the police of muffing up the arrest. There is talk that the Jodhpur police deliberately weakened the case to help the accused and stop them from revealing the identity of other VIP victims.

The Ramlal Jat incident has sent shock waves among his colleagues and was a topic of hot discussion after the cabinet meeting on February 2 in Jaipur. In a strange comment to reporters, the minister said he "was fortunate and thankful to the girl who preferred suicide over indulging in such sordid matters". Some months ago, a woman had lodged a complaint of sexual exploitation against an aide of another minister, Pratap Singh Khachariyawas, but the police later arrested the 'victim' after an investigation found the charges false.

Madhya Pradesh too has seen a



ANI



PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR

**RAJASTHAN MINISTER
RAMLAL JAT AND
CONTROVERSIAL BJP
MP PRAGYA THAKUR
(ABOVE) WERE
AMONG THOSE
TARGETED BY
THE GANGS**

number of such cases in the recent past. Weeks before the Pragya Thakur case, a senior BJP leader in Shivpuri, Harihar Sharma, had lodged a complaint about a topless woman calling him on video. In August 2021 in Gwalior, revenue officer



VICE-LIKE HOLD
Deepaly and Akshat
Sharma after their
arrest in Jodhpur



PANKAJ TIWARI

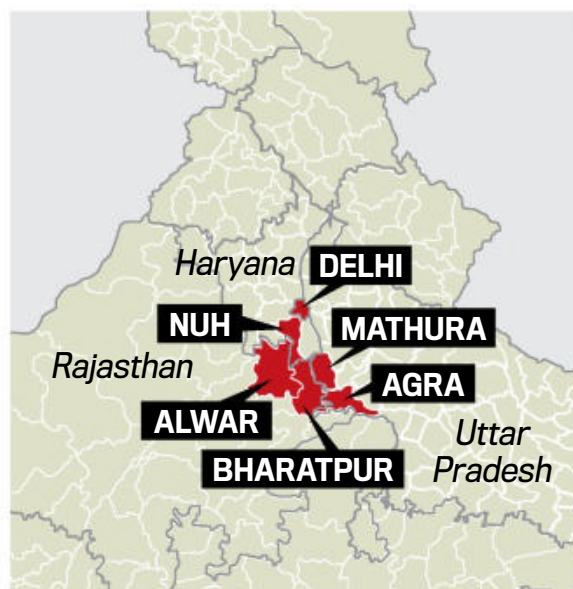
Ravinandan Tiwari had an FIR lodged when a nude woman recorded a call with him and later demanded Rs 50,000. The same month, Harendra Singh Gurjar of the zila Congress Sewa Dal lodged a similar complaint in the city.

Pragya Thakur could be the first case of a woman being targeted. One thing that has been established is that the Mewat region, from where the suspects were arrested, is now a hub of innovative cyber crimes, including “virtual honeytraps”.

“Criminal minds keep finding new ways to make money. Sextortion is the new trend,” says Ashok Rathore, additional DGP, Special Operations Group

CRIME TRACKER

The CyCaps portal's readings suggest that many of the accused in sextortion cases were from the Mewat region



(SOG), Rajasthan. Looking at a map on CyCaps, a portal developed by the Telangana Police to track suspected telephone numbers used in cyber crimes, he says the location tracker shows a very high density of such numbers active in the seven police districts of the extended Mewat region. These are Bharatpur, Alwar and Bhiwadi in Rajasthan, Agra and Mathura in UP, Nuh and Mewat in Haryana and parts of Delhi. A number of criminals have been arrested in sex-and-blackmail cases from this region.

In 2020, an interstate cooperation cell was set up for these seven districts, with the respective IGs and SPs of police from all four states on board. Many mobile phones active in these districts use SIM cards issued in Odisha, West Bengal and Bihar, but the coordinated efforts have started showing results.

On February 9, Delhi Police arrested Samaydeen, 28, and Munfed, 26, from the Mewat region. The duo are accused of cheating at least 200 people through online honeytraps similar to the one used on the BJP MP; they had Rs 22 lakh in their account. In October last year, Nasir from Bharatpur district was arrested on similar charges by Delhi Police. In December 2021, Delhi Police nabbed Neeraj from Bahadurgarh in Haryana, who ran a similar gang. His gang had at least 12 victims from whom they had extorted Rs 1 crore. Gang members created social media accounts using fake IDs, cultivated potential victims and lured them into physical interactions

with women accomplices. Sextortion cases are piling up in Rajasthan. Police are investigating a number of complaints from resident doctors of Jaipur's state-run SMS Hospital, who have been targeted virtually by anonymous callers. In November last year, the SOG chargesheeted five accused, including two from Alwar, for making an objectionable video of a prominent personality and then extorting money.

Police say while victims of cyber financial frauds were spread all over, a lot of the targets of sextortion are based in the southern states. And it is difficult to trace these cyber criminals. Although CyCaps generates a lot of data, which includes social media profiles, IMEI numbers of handsets used and inter-linked phone numbers, it is still not enough to nail down a suspect as multiple police stations, banks and payment portals are involved.

Rajasthan DGP M.L. Lather says that while the police are using the latest digital technology to catch such criminals, “the people must be careful interacting with strangers online and must report any suspicious numbers/ activities immediately”. Since in many cases victims have only interacted online with the callers, officials say the “shame element is less than in physical honeytrap cases”. (In the 2016 Akshat Sharma gang case, only five of the 30 victims came forward to lodge a complaint. Even the prominent Congress leader, who paid a ransom of Rs 20 lakh, refused to join the investigation.)

A bigger concern for cops now is children being compromised. They fear that with children having ready access to mobile phones and internet, extortionists may start targeting them. “If they could do it to a woman MP, they can do it to anyone,” says a senior police officer. The Union ministry of home affairs runs the CyberTipline, which alerts state police about those uploading suspected videos of child pornography, rapes, etc. and those accessing such material. Between April 2020 and June 2021, Rajasthan police received 31,086 such inputs. The Cyber Crime Unit referred 82 cases to the districts. ■

COVER STORY UTTAR PRADESH

THE CHALLENGER

➤ AKHILESH YADAV

CAN THE SAMAJWADI PARTY CHIEF
DEFEAT THE MIGHTY BJP IN UP?

BY RAJ CHENGAPPA with PRASHANT SRIVASTAVA in Lucknow

Photographs by BANDEEP SINGH





PRIMARY CONTENDER Akhilesh on his roadshow in Lucknow, Feb. 21



AKHILESH YADAV IS OVER AN HOUR LATE for his drive-through election rally in Hazratganj, Lucknow's main shopping centre, and yet instead of dissipating, the crowd only grows in a strange, primal fashion—the way you may see a forest growing in a time-lapse video—till it becomes that surging organismic mass that greets his campaign bus. There is an adulation, the kind only rockstars get, as women wave to catch his attention and bands of young men reach out desperately to touch his hand. Some of the more energetic ones perform dangerous acrobatics, with pillion riders standing up on moving motorcycles, waving flags at him while taking selfies. There are those who want to present him with large bronze maces, others with shiny photos of Hindu gods or fancy tiny models of cycles (his party's symbol) or floral garlands. As Akhilesh spots each offering in the crowd, he tells his driver to stop and reaches out to collect it... even though his arms are in danger of being pulled out of their sockets. "The least I can do is to receive their gifts—it keeps me connected to them and the memory will always

stay with them," Akhilesh remarks. He speaks in his characteristic style, disarming and free of bombast, but everybody here in this multitude will be hoping that something more than mere memory stays with them.

Similar crowds thronged the route his campaign bus took through the city. Just two days later, on February 23, Lucknow voted—part of a swathe of central Uttar Pradesh, 59 constituencies in all, bunched together for the fourth phase of the assembly election. Lucknow city is considered a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) pocket borough. It has won the lone Lok Sabha seat here eight consecutive times since 1991, and swept all its five constituent assembly seats in 2017. Can the visible surge of support for Akhilesh here be a sign that there is a wave in favour of the Samajwadi Party (SP) leader across the state? Akhilesh, for one, refuses to get bowled over by the crowds, saying, "It's energising to experience, but I still have a long distance to go." True enough. There are three more phases left, that too in the complex playfield of eastern UP. So that honest acknowledgement shows just how rooted the SP leader is as he gets down with his team to fine-tune the party's campaign strategy for the rest of the battle.

It would be a political miracle if the 48-year-old Akhilesh were to pull off a win. (The results are due on March 10). In 2017, the BJP had polled nearly 40 per cent of the votes and won a massive majority of 312 of the 403 seats on its own (the NDA won 325 in all). In contrast, the SP, which had won a majority of 224 seats in 2012 with a vote share of 29 per cent, got a sound thrashing in 2017. Its seat tally dropped to an ignominious 47—its lowest since its inception in 1992—and its vote share fell to 21.8 per cent. If Akhilesh has to beat the BJP, he must not only ensure that the SP's vote share doubles to around 40 per cent, but do that by making a significant dent in the BJP's vote share. Such a numerical reversal is by itself not an impossible task—the BJP did something similar in 2017, turbo-charging itself to go from 15 per cent to an astounding 39.7 per cent of overall votes. The question is whether Akhilesh has created anything matching in terms of a positive *lehar* (wave). Or, even if that falls short as a singular propulsive factor, does a negative anti-incumbency tendency exist that's strong enough to make up for the deficit?

The answer to that question remains in the balance, but many psephologists acknowledge that what Akhilesh has achieved so far is already remarkable. In a crowded field, he has succeeded in positioning himself



THE INCUMBENT Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath at a rally in Ayodhya on February 22

AKHILESH HAS CONVERTED THE CONTEST INTO A DIRECT CHIEF MINISTERIAL BATTLE WITH YOGI ADITYANATH AND TURNED A DISUNITED, DISPIRITED SP INTO A CATALYTIC, COMBAT-READY FIGHTING UNIT

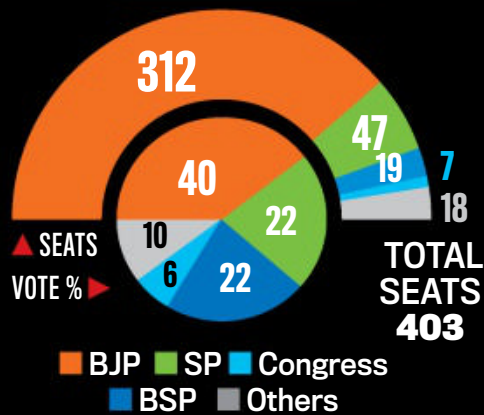
as the prime challenger to the BJP. He has converted what is usually a tri-cornered contest, with four-time CM Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) being the third pole, into a distinctly bipolar contest. He has pulled a disunited, dispirited SP out of the morass it had fallen into after the 2017 debacle and turned it into a catalytic, combat-ready fighting unit capable of challenging the world's biggest party. And he has cleverly converted the battle into a chief ministerial contest between incumbent Yogi Adityanath and himself, studiously avoiding making direct references to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. That the BJP is rattled is evident. Both Modi

and Yogi can be found targeting mostly Akhilesh in their campaign speeches rather than Mayawati or state Congress chief Priyanka Gandhi. psephologist Sanjay Kumar, director of CSDS Lok Niti, is one of those who believes the BJP will form a government again in the state, but he acknowledges, "It is a tight election and Akhilesh is like a one-man army against the formidable BJP. He may push up the SP's tally to 140 seats, which is huge, considering the party's dismal tally of 47 in 2017."

Akhilesh, though, is not satisfied with being classified as second best and believes he and his party can win. In the five years out of power, he worked to gain full control

THE AKHILESH GAMEPLAN

ASSEMBLY 2017



PHASE I: 58 SEATS

WESTERN BELT

In this region, the first to go to the polls, Jats make up over 15 per cent of the population. The campaign for the SP-RLD (Samajwadi Party-Rashtriya Lok Dal) alliance in this region was led by RLD chief Jayant Chaudhary. The important voting blocs in this area include Jats, Gujjars and Dalits (Jatavs)



● BJP: 53
● SP: 2
● BSP: 2
● RLD: 1

PHASE II: 55 SEATS

NORTHWEST REGION

With Muslim leader and Congress heavyweight Imran Masood joining from Saharanpur, and the release of Abdullah Azam (son of SP leader Azam Khan) from jail just before the polls, the SP hopes to consolidate the Muslim vote in this region. The major voting blocs here are the Jats, Dalits (Jatavs) and Muslims



● BJP: 38
● SP: 15
● Cong: 2

PHASE III: 59 SEATS

SOUTHERN BLOCK

SP chief Akhilesh Yadav stood from Mainpuri, highlighting his party's strength in the Yadav bastion. Following the recent IT (income tax) department raids in Kannauj, the SP hoped to consolidate the votes of perfume traders in the region. The major voting blocs are the Yadavs, Lodhs, Shakyas and Mauryas



● BJP: 49
● SP: 8
● Cong: 1

PHASE	SEATS	PHASE	SEATS
I	58	IV	59
II	55	V	61
III	59	VI	57
		VII	54



PHASE IV: 59 SEATS

CENTRAL UP

Here, the SP is in alliance with Shivpal Singh Yadav's PSP (Pragatisheel Samajwadi Party) and the Mahan Dal, which focuses on Mauryas and Shakyas. It also courted Brahmins and its huge roadshow in Lucknow played an important role. Major voting blocs include Brahmins, Thakurs, Yadavs and non-Jatav Dalits



● BJP: 51
● SP: 4
● BSP: 2
● Cong: 2

PHASE V: 61 SEATS

CENTRAL & EAST

The SP's outreach to non-Yadav OBCs could help, but the BJP is strongly positioned here. The SP is in alliance with the Apna Dal (K), led by Krishna Patel, the mother of MoS Commerce and Industry Anupriya Patel. Kurmi voters make up over 7 per cent of the population. Other major blocs include Mauryas and Brahmins



● BJP: 50
● SP: 3
● Cong: 1
● Others: 7

PHASE VI: 57 SEATS

NORTHEAST

To counter the BJP's Yogi Adityanath, who will stand from Gorakhpur, the SP has fielded a Brahmin candidate to make the poll battle a Brahmin vs Thakur contest. Here, Brahmins make up over 12 per cent of the population in many constituencies. Major voting blocs include Brahmins, Nishads, Mauryas and Kurmis



● BJP: 48
● SP: 2
● BSP: 5
● Others: 2

PHASE VII: 54 SEATS

SOUTHEAST

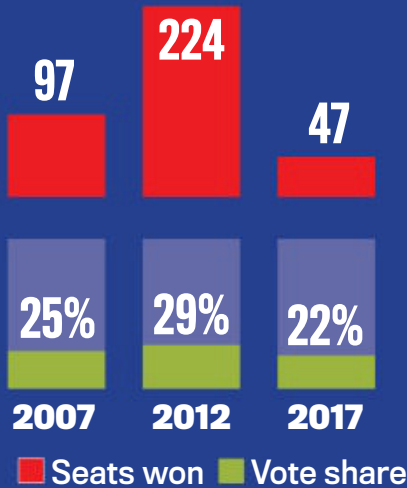
The SP has tied up with the SBSP and the Janwadi Socialist Party here, looking for votes from Rajbhars (over 10 per cent of the population) and Nonia Chauhans (three per cent). Akhilesh Yadav may also campaign with Mamata Banerjee in Varanasi. Major voting blocs include Rajbhars, Kurmis and non-Jatav Dalits



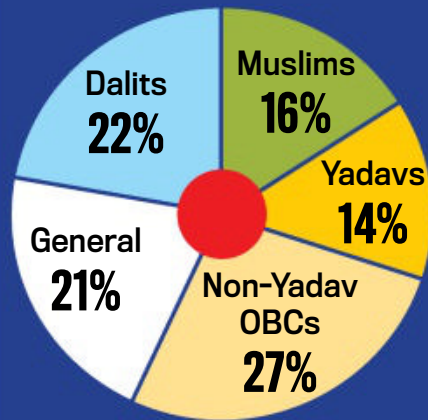
● BJP: 31
● SP: 13
● BSP: 6
● Others: 4

SP & FRIENDS

PREVIOUS ELECTIONS: SEATS & VOTES



TICKET DISTRIBUTION 2022



CRUCIAL ALLIES

Through alliances with the RLD, SBSP and PSP(L), the SP has given itself a strong footprint across Uttar Pradesh



RLD

The Rashtriya Lok Dal, led by Jayant Chaudhury, is a regional party that focuses mainly on Jats, who are classified as OBCs. They are a significant bloc in at least a dozen seats across western UP



SBSP

The Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party, led by Om Prakash Rajbhar, has a footprint mainly in Varanasi, Azamgarh, Ballia and Mau. Rajbhars are considered one of the more influential OBC communities in eastern UP



PSP(L)

The Pragatisheel Samaj Party (Lohia), led by Shivpal Yadav, has a presence across the state. The PSP(L) chief is popular among the Samajwadi Party's old loyalists, and can also rely on his cross-party connections

OTHER PARTNERS

The SP has also allied with smaller parties to tie up regional votes

MAHAN DAL

Influential in central UP, the party focuses on Mauryas and Shakyas—over four per cent of the population

JANWADI PARTY (SOCIALIST)

Influential in east UP, it focuses on the Nonia Chauhans, who make up two per cent of the population

APNA DAL (KAMERAWADI)

Influential in east UP, it focuses on Kurmis, who make up over seven per cent of the population of Uttar Pradesh

of the party, uniting warring factions and even suing for peace with his disgruntled uncle, Shivpal Yadav, who had left the party and formed his own unit. He also learnt from the defeat of the Grand Alliance he had put together with the BSP for the Lok Sabha election in 2019. Despite the alliance's seemingly infallible combined vote share of nearly 40 per cent, the BJP-led NDA won 64 of the 80 seats in the state. What hurt more was that the BSP won 10 seats and the SP took just 5. While Mayawati broke away from the alliance soon after the results, abusing the SP for the defeat, Akhilesh refused to engage in a *tu tu, main main* battle. Instead, he focused on charting a clear solo future that could challenge the formidable war machinery of the BJP. Far more mature than before, he is now seen to possess a mind of his own and is willing to take tough decisions and tell people off.

T

his time, he shunned the prospect of an alliance with even the Congress. His reason: "They were asking for too many seats and it didn't seem to benefit the SP to do a tie-up." Instead, he and his team studied the key reasons for his 2017

defeat. Among them, they zeroed in on one fact: from 2012 onwards, the BJP had worked hard to shed its image of being a party of the elite castes, particularly of Brahmins and Banias. To do that, it sharp-focused on a different part of UP's social geography: its vast OBC community map, which accounts for as much as 40 per cent of the state's overall votes. Ignoring the Yadavs, who account for only eight per cent of that total, the party built bridges and alliances with the expansive array of non-Yadavs. These included bits of everything on that whole graded scale from middle OBC castes to those that fell in the extreme backward class (EBC) classification, from Patels to Rajbhars, Mauryas, Kushwahas, Nishads and a host of others. Many of them may come with only around 2-3 per cent of the total vote, that too spread across major regions, but together they added up to a substantial number. Moreover, it was like taking a torch to an unlit part of the map: it made visible even darker hinterlands. This was the Dalit population, 20 per cent of UP, but broken up into 65 castes. Mayawati had a tight hold on the Jatavs, her own community, which constitutes a little over half of all Dalits in UP. So the BJP went about winning over the non-Jatavs: Pasi, Dhobi, Kori, Khatik, Basor, Sapera et al. The result? Post-poll analysis in 2017 showed that the BJP had won as much as 58 per cent of the OBC votes and 17 per cent of the Dalit votes, besides of course 62 per

cent of its traditional *savarna* vote—a highly successful feat of social engineering that united the Hindu electorate to a degree rarely seen before in the state.

If that phalanx had to be broken, the SP's old regimental formation was not going to suffice—bits of brick and mortar had to be shaken loose from that castle to build one's own. The BJP strategy had evolved at the subterranean level, while keeping its saffron topsoil intact—its Hindutva had been Mandalised, and its new OBC adherents 'Hinduised'. (Even Yadavs were not immune to Hindutva's charms.) It warranted that the Samajwadis change their game too to cope with this, emulating the opponent's moves. Call it social reverse-engineering. What helped Akhilesh and his core team were the cracks in the BJP's ramparts that they could exploit. The ascension of Yogi Adityanath, a Thakur, had left many OBCs displeased at the outset. They had hoped to see state president Keshav Prasad Maurya, an OBC, elevated to the CM's post. That faint sense of alienation only deepened over five years. Also, with Adityanath serving up a Hindutva that was hard and unleavened, Muslim estrangement was near-complete. Just prior to the polls, the Muslims, some 20 per cent of UP's population, apparently decided that the SP was their best bet; both Sunnis and Shias decided to back Akhilesh. Along with a good chunk of the eight per cent Yadav votes, that meant the SP began the electoral race with around 25 per cent votes in its tank. The thing to do now was to top up.

The SP had been in contact with disgruntled OBC leaders in the BJP, who felt their interests had been neglected and their space constricted. Says Udaiveer Singh, an MLC and a key SP strategist, "The BJP triumphed in 2017 by taking a large section of non-Yadavs, mainly MBCs, with them. But after their victory, they did not give them a representation at the district level. The BJP's district units are mostly *savarna*-dominated, so these MBC leaders felt discriminated against. They felt they were not natural allies of the BJP and decided to join us."

The plans were laid to win over prominent non-Yadav leaders, but the catchword was patience. The party waited to strike at the most opportune time: *after* the polls were announced. To Yogi and the BJP's embarrassment, three prominent non-Yadav OBC ministers—Swami Prasad Maurya, Dara Singh Chauhan and Dharam Singh Saini—resigned from their posts and joined the SP at that delicate stage, the last lap when a momentum could be created for the home stretch. Then the SP forged alliances with smaller OBC and EBC parties keeping in mind their regional spread. In central UP, it tied up with the Mahan Dal, which has a sizeable following of Mauryas and Shakyas. To expand its presence in Purvanchal, it allied with the Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), one of the factions that competes for the 7



THE DOUBLE ENGINE CM Adityanath and PM Modi at a BJP election rally in Kasganj, Feb. 11

per cent Kurmi Patel vote. They also tied up with two other parties with a following in the east: the influential Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP), led by Om Prakash Rajbhar, and the Janwadi Party, which commands a following among Lonia Chauhans. These two combined account for five per cent of the population. Meanwhile, in western UP, the SP tied up with the RLD, now led by former PM Charan Singh's grandson Jayant Chaudhary, who has built up a groundswell of support for himself among the Jat farmers after his father Ajit Singh's demise—the Centre's ham-handed handling of the now-repealed farm laws aiding that process.

The SP's outreach to Dalits had been practically non-existent before this election—Yadav-Dalit relations aren't the rosiest on the ground, and the baggage of a historically difficult relationship with Mayawati reflects that. To make amends, the



AP

MODI IS PLANNING A BLITZKRIEG OF RALLIES IN THE FINAL PHASE OF THE UP ELECTION WHICH COULD BOLSTER THE BJP'S TALLY SUBSTANTIALLY

SP launched a Dalit wing called 'Baba Sahib Vahini', aimed specifically at non-Jatav Dalits and scheduled tribes. One SP functionary claims that over 50 per cent of the 18 BSP MLAs and 25 per cent of its zonal coordinators and district presidents have switched loyalties in the past year-and-a-half to come on the SP platform. What has helped is that Mayawati had been a near-recluse in the run-up to this election; in fact, the SP suspects she is working in tandem with the BJP. Anyway, Akhilesh's campaign slogan is that the 'Samajwadis' and 'Ambedkarwadis' will together finish off the BJP. '*Bhaiya hi bharosa hai, nayi hawa hai, nayi Sapa hai* (Can trust Akhilesh, there is a new wave, a new SP)', he promises. The idea is to get close to 40 per cent of the vote share needed to get a majority—and any small accretion to its base would help. When it came to ticket distribution, Akhilesh ensured it was

spread evenly across the new rainbow coalition he had engineered. An SP leader says, "We even reduced the number of tickets to Yadavs and Muslims to shed the M-Y tag." The final distribution saw 27 per cent of the seats going to non-Yadav OBCs and 22 per cent to Dalits. Yadavs and Muslims together got 30 per cent. The remaining 21 per cent was distributed across all other categories, including Brahmin faces.

On the campaign trail, Akhilesh is careful not to fall into any of the traps laid by the BJP. He waves away all talk of social engineering and caste politics, saying, "My focus is on *vikas*, not caste. We have distributed tickets in such a way that all castes and communities are included." The BJP tried its best to brand him as pro-Muslim, but Akhilesh did not join issue with it. He ignored the digs Yogi made in his speech in Ayodhya that his old SP regime ensured power supply during Id celebrations but not for Diwali. Modi went so far as to accuse Akhilesh of supporting terrorists and also linked his party's symbol, the cycle, to those who carried out the Ahmedabad bomb blasts, but Akhilesh refused to be provoked. There was no doubt that these barbs were aimed at disrupting the SP's formidable caste line-up and consolidating the Hindu vote through polarisation. Sudheendra Kulkarni, a former BJP ideologue now turned bitter critic who is in UP as a political observer, says, "This is gutter-level politics. While the effect of polarisation is still there, it is not as much as it was 2017. It is also because Akhilesh has moderated his party's image of being pro-Muslim."

Akhilesh does not criticise Modi as he wants to keep the issues local. Instead, he focuses on Yogi's performance—or, as he puts it, "the lack of it"—and mockingly refers to him as "*Baba mukhyamantri*". The brunt of his criticism is on the BJP government's perceived inability to deliver on jobs, improve the incomes of farmers and tackle the problem of stray cattle damaging their crops. At a rally in Unnao's Bhagwantnagar constituency, he shortened '*kala kanoon*' ('black law', a reference to the farm laws) to a handy '*Kaka*' and spun a desi witticism: "*Kaka toh chale gaye, ab Baba bhi jaane waale hain* (The black farm laws are gone, now Yogi will go too)." Yogi hit back the next day at a rally in Ayodhya, pointing to the lawlessness that prevailed when Akhilesh was chief minister and how he had got rid of the mafia gangs supported by the SP. Yogi told the rally, "We have got rid of the *parivarvaad* (nepotism), *aatankvaad* (terrorism) and *jaatvaad* (casteism) that SP symbolises. All they did was terrorise the people while the BJP brought genuine development." Yogi's announcement that he would provide 2 crore laptops and smartphones for students was greeted with the loudest cheers. The chief minister also has his own brand of charisma and is perceived to be hardworking and incorruptible—an image that Akhilesh has been trying hard to dent in the course of his campaign.

But while the leaders themselves may be trapped in permutations of identity politics, the populace is caught in a universal narrative of distress. Taking a dig at BJP rule, Annu

Tandon, a Congress MP from Unnao who joined the SP in 2020, says, “*Bhooke pet bhajan nahin hota* (You can’t pray on an empty stomach). There is frustration across the electorate over dwindling incomes and lack of jobs.” Akhilesh is very mindful of that, of course, and is seeking to tap into that thirst for better life-chances. In addition to the usual sops for students, he has used the SP manifesto to promise 1.1 million government jobs for the youth, and creating another 2.2 million jobs in the IT sector. For farmers, he is pushing for an assured MSP, free fertilisers and credit with zero interest. For women, besides reservations in government jobs and trebling the monthly pension for the older cohort, he is promising to raise a special force for their security. Former chief secretary Alok Ranjan, who helped draft the SP manifesto, says, “Akhilesh is a visionary who wants to provide world-class infrastructure for Uttar Pradesh, for which he has a proven track record.”

It is a spirited fight for sure. But the road from Karhal to Lucknow is still paved with ifs and buts. Psephologist Yashwant Deshmukh, founder-director of C-Voter, feels Akhilesh started his counter-attack too late and didn’t do too much for the past two years. “Akhilesh may have become the prime challenger to the BJP, but that is partly because Mayawati has been dormant,” he says. “You cannot win an election by default. He is not a Mamata Banerjee, who changed her strategy early enough. He is unlikely to get the vote percentage to beat the BJP.” Deshmukh believes the Jats have not voted en bloc for the SP and the alliances Akhilesh stitched together are not delivering as much as he may have hoped for. He also points to the blitzkrieg of rallies Modi is planning to undertake in the final phases that could bolster the BJP’s chances, as in 2017. Kulkarni thinks Akhilesh remains a one-man army. “Everything is on his shoulders,” he says. “There is insufficient planning and delegation of responsibilities and insufficient messaging on crucial issues. His campaign looks disorganised when compared to his foe’s well-oiled party machine. Despite all this, though, it will be a close fight.”

What Akhilesh has done, though, is shake the BJP out of its complacency: even if it holds on, it will have been no walkover. One way or the other, the results will carry an effect well beyond the boundaries of Uttar Pradesh. A BJP win will consolidate the country’s march towards Hindutva and put the BJP in pole position to win the 2024 election. If Akhilesh pulls it off, it will galvanise Opposition forces across the country. Kulkarni goes even further and says, “It will be the beginning of the end of the Modi era.” The stakes are indeed high, not just for Akhilesh but for the country’s entire political spectrum. ■



FACE-OFF

THE YOGI AND THE RIVAL IN CHIEF



Both **Yogi Adityanath** of the Bharatiya Janata Party and **Akhilesh Yadav** of the Samajwadi Party have completed a term each as chief minister of India's most populous state. Now, they head into an electoral battle in which they are the primary contenders. In interviews with Group Editorial Director **Raj Chengappa** half way through the polls, they shared their assessments of the election so far and their views on key issues in the contest. Excerpts:

Q. Half-way through the assembly election, what do you see as the main electoral issues?

YOGI ADITYANATH: The main issue in UP is security, the rule of law. Who can guarantee security to every person, provide a riot- and fear-free environment, freedom from all kinds of hooliganism and anarchy? The double-engine government of the Bharatiya Janata Party has created an environment in the state where every person feels safe and protected. Freedom is guaranteed, every person is respected and it is linked to the welfare schemes of the government. I am happy that we have been able to serve the people under the leadership and guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

AKHILESH YADAV: The double-engine *sarkar* will be derailed this time; people will not let them win. In the past five years, the Yogi government promised so much, but did not deliver. They promised 70 lakh jobs they could not deliver, they had investor meets, but

nothing came to the state. The real issue is unemployment among the youth. Farmers' distress is another—the Yogi government promised their incomes would be doubled but could not ensure it. See how prices have risen too. And they talk of law and order. In Lucknow, a woman constable was kidnapped and killed but they found the body only after two days. Another IPS officer is absconding. There are so many other incidents. My track record was better. Look at the statistics.

Q. How strong is the caste factor in this election?

YOGI: It has no role. The people know that the biggest obstacles in the development of Uttar Pradesh are casteism, *parivarvaad* (nepotism) and corruption. The Opposition formed a Grand Alliance in 2019. People gave the BJP 62 of the 80 seats. Janata Janardan voted on the issue of nationalism, development and good governance in 2014, 2017 and 2019. The public will vote the same way for the BJP in 2022 as we believe in 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'.

AKHILESH: It always does play a role. This time, we have built an alliance in which all caste and communities are participating. I have given place to every one of them and have respected everyone. We have distributed tickets in such a way that all caste and communities are included. We are focusing on *vikas*, not caste. If Babaji (Yogi) is talking of *parivarvaad*, then what about Jyotiraditya Scindia and his sisters? What about Rajnath Singh and his son?

Q. What did you achieve as CM and what are your plans for 2.0?

YOGI: I have changed the country's and the world's perception about UP in five years. Before 2017, people believed UP had riots, an atmosphere of fear, anarchy, hooliganism, its youth were facing an identity crisis. UP has changed that perception in five years. Today,

“ AKHILESHJI DOES NOT KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THE COUNTRY AND THE WORLD. HE WAS RATED THE MOST NIKAMMA CM. TODAY, THE UP CM IS RATED NO.1 IN INDIA ”

YOGI ADITYANATH
CM, Uttar Pradesh

“ WHEN A CHILD FAILS, HIS PARENTS GO TO THE SCHOOL AND ASK THEM TO PASS THEIR CHILD. THAT IS WHAT THE PM IS TRYING TO DO FOR BABAJI ”

AKHILESH YADAV
President, Samajwadi Party

UP is thinking in terms of development, UP is thinking about welfare schemes. UP has become a progressive state, its economy is in a very good position. Earlier, it was considered the sixth or seventh largest economy in the country, today it is the second largest. We were ranked 14th in Ease of Doing Business; in the past five years, we have climbed up to second place. We

will make UP the number one economy in the coming five years. For this, we need a double-engine government.

AKHILESH: People still remember the work we did in infrastructure. We built world-class expressways, metros, universities, training institutes and hospitals. We brought in the best police reform system. BJP is only cutting ribbons on projects we started in my tenure as CM. People feel confident about the work we did earlier and that we will continue to serve them if we win. My wish is to build for the next generation. They have dreams and we must help them fulfil them. If they have nothing, then what is our future? I will work at double the speed and triple the economy of the state.

Q. How do you view your opponent?

YOGI: Akhileshji does not know anything about the country and the world. He wakes up at 12 noon, gets ready by 2 pm. After that, some scholar comes and explains things to him. They utter three or four things by rote and then their routine is done. Not much good can be expected from him. He was rated as the most *nikamma* (useless) CM. Today, UP has a CM who is rated as number one in the country. That's the difference between us.

AKHILESH: We have seen that when a child fails, his parents go to the school to convince the authorities to pass him. That is what the PM is trying to do, as also all the talk of double-engine *sarkar*. Baba mukhyamantri has been an utter failure.

Q. Who will win the polls?

YOGI: We have once again set a target of 300+ and I am 100 per cent sure we will cross it.

AKHILESH: UP has always given absolute majorities in the past elections and this time we will get one again. ■

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INDIA'S BIGGEST BANKING FRAUD

The inside story of how **Rishi Agarwal of ABG Shipyard allegedly misappropriated Rs 22,842 crore** in loans from a consortium of 28 Indian banks

BY M.G. ARUN & KIRAN D. TARE

IN

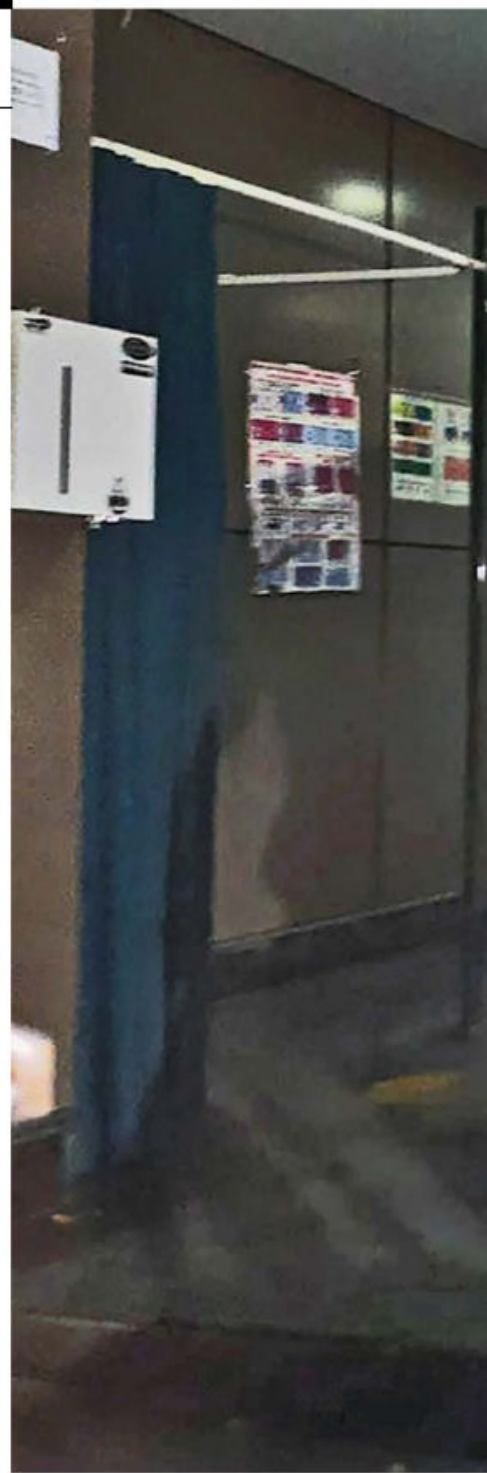
2009, an interesting battle for supremacy in India's shipbuilding and offshore business was being waged in Mumbai. On one side was India's second largest shipbuilder, Bharati Shipyard, founded in 1973 by friends Prakash C. Kapoor and Vijay Kumar. On the other side was the fast-growing ABG Shipyard, promoted by Rishi Agarwal, a Purdue University graduate and first-time entrepreneur. The contest was for control of Great Offshore, a supplier of rigs used in offshore drilling and an arm of the Great Eastern Shipping Company.

Agarwal placed an unsolicited bid for Great Offshore as a counter to an ongoing

open offer from Bharati Shipyard, making the business world sit up and take notice. While Bharati secured a controlling stake in Great Offshore, Agarwal picked up a 15 per cent stake. The aggressive bids would go down as one of the fiercest corporate battles in the Indian shipping sector.

ABG Shipyard was India's number one shipbuilder then, with a swelling order book (Rs 16,000 crore in 2012). It's another story that both the shipbuilders slipped deep into debt soon after, undertook debt-restructuring exercises—where negotiations are done with lenders for reduced interest rates—and before the end of the next decade lost control of their companies. Great Offshore itself, renamed GOL Offshore, shut down operations in 2018 after a failed debt-restructuring exercise.

A little over a decade since the Great Offshore battle, Agarwal, a nephew of Ruia brothers Shashi and Ravi of the Es-



PTI



QUESTION TIME

Rishi Agarwal leaves the CBI office in New Delhi on February 21

sar Group, is back in the news—this time for the wrong reasons. The CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) has booked Agarwal, former chairman of ABG Shipyard, and other directors of the firm for alleged misappropriation of Rs 22,842 crore from a consortium of 28 banks, including the State Bank of India (SBI), India's largest public sector bank, and ICICI Bank, the country's second-largest private bank.

Agarwal, four ABG Shipyard officials—executive director Santhanam Muthuswamy and directors Ashwini Kumar, Sushil Kumar Agarwal and Ravi Vimal Nevetia—and some 'unknown public servants' have been accused in the scam, which has once again exposed loopholes in the banking system that allow fraudsters to siphon off taxpayers' money. The

banking system is already reeling under non-performing assets (NPAs) to the tune of Rs 8.35 lakh crore (March 2021), further squeezing lending.

A fallen star

What caused the downfall of ABG Shipyard and Agarwal's fall from glory? ABG was born in 1985 when Agarwal bought a small shipbuilding facility in Gujarat, Magdala Shipyard. The ambitious Agarwal went on to build scale and sophistication in his business. From 1990, over a decade, his firm built over 165 ships, a majority of them for clients in Europe and Asia. In 2000, ABG Shipyard got its first government order to build two inceptor boats for the Coast Guard. In 2011, it secured a licence to build ships, including submarines, for the Indian defence sector.

₹22,842 crore

Amount CBI says 28 banks lost in the ABG Shipyard fraud

₹7,089 crore

ABG Shipyard's dues to ICICI Bank

₹2,925 crore

Size of SBI's exposure to ABG Shipyard

₹8.35 lakh crore

Indian banks' NPAs as of March 2021

THE 'FRAUD'

The four instances of alleged misappropriation of funds by Rishi Agarwal and ABG Shipyard officials



Rs 1,415 crore was allegedly transferred through vendors and group firms and round-tripped back to the company. 'Round-tripping' is circulation of money across jurisdictions, culminating in its return to the jurisdiction of origin, usually as foreign investment.



ABG Shipyard invested in **\$43.5 million (Rs 326 crore)** worth of securities of ABG Singapore. According to EY's forensic audit, the money may have been siphoned out of the system.



ABG Shipyard transferred **Rs 83 crore** to related firms, but the assets were allegedly not shown as part of the company's asset pool.



Under restructuring, lenders set up a trust and retention account (TRA). The money coming into the company during the period is held in the TRA so that lenders can monitor its use. The SBI says over 50 per cent of ABG Shipyard's receipts had been outside this arrangement—a breach of the restructuring agreement.

Sources: FIR against ABG Shipyard, EY forensic audit

The company operated two shipyards, the main one on the banks of the Tapi river in Magdalla, Surat, and spread over 35 acres. The other one was in Dahej, Bharuch, and was set up in collaboration with the Gujarat Maritime Board. It had plans to build a third shipyard in Gujarat with an investment of Rs 2,500 crore. Things went well for ABG Shipyard until the end of 2012-13. That year, the company made a net profit of Rs 107 crore on total revenues of Rs 2,149 crore. The company had three subsidiaries—Western India Shipyard (then a BSE-listed company), ABG Shipyard Singapore Pte, and ABG FPSO Private Limited. But ABG Shipyard's fall started the following year when it posted a loss of Rs 199 crore. By March 2016, the losses had ballooned to Rs 3,704 crore even as revenues fell to a mere Rs 37 crore.

The cancellation of ship/ vessel orders, a dip in lending from banks, high cost of borrowing and low capacity utilisation at the Dahej shipyard were cited as reasons for the firm's troubles. The end of the central government's shipbuilding subsidy way back in 2007 had also hit the company's bottomline over the years. Eventually, ABG Shipyard owed Rs 22,842 crore to 28 banks. The top three lenders were ICICI Bank (Rs 7,089 crore), IDBI Bank (Rs 3,639 crore) and SBI (Rs 2,925 crore). Most of these loan disbursements took place between 2005 and 2012. Unable to service them, ABG Shipyard went into a corporate debt-restructuring scheme in 2013-14.

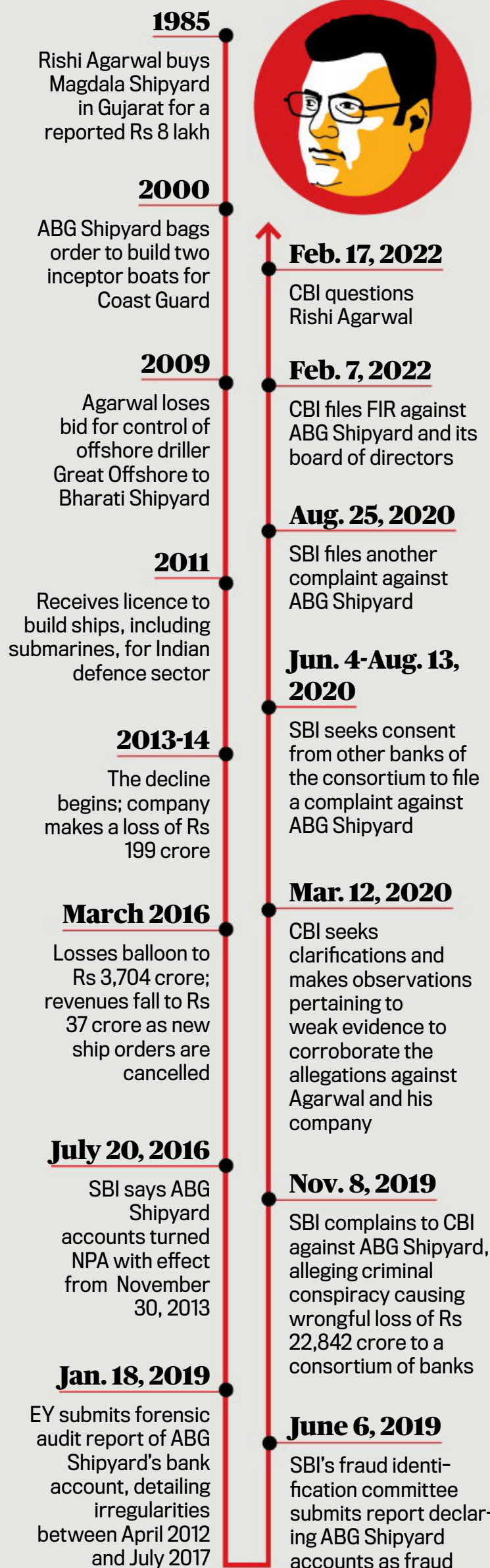
A scam unravelled

On August 25, 2020, Balaji Singh Samanta, a deputy general manager with the SBI in Mumbai, walked into the CBI office at Cuffe Parade. He was carrying a complaint from his bank, which stated that ABG Shipyard had intentionally caused a loss of Rs 22,842 crore to the ICICI Bank-led consortium of 28 banks. The SBI had made a similar complaint on November 8, 2019, but there had been no action as the CBI asked for some clarifications a few months later. The fresh complaint was again put in cold storage.

On February 7 this year, the CBI registered an FIR (first information report) against ABG Shipyard and its board of directors, led by Agarwal. The FIR states that the 'fraud' was committed through 'diversion of funds, misappropriation and criminal breach of trust, with an objective to gain unlawfully at the cost of the bank's funds'. The allegations place the ABG Shipyard case as India's biggest banking scam ever, overtaking the 2018 Punjab National Bank scam in which diamondaires Nirav Modi and Mehul Choksi stand accused of siphoning off Rs 14,000 crore.

The offence in the ABG Shipyard case has been registered almost a decade after the alleged fraud began and three years after "criminal breach of trust" was pinpointed by auditing firm Ernst & Young (EY). The CBI has yet to make arrests. The agency questioned Agarwal on February 17. A day earlier, the Enforcement Directorate (ED)

RISHI AGARWAL THE RISE AND FALL



RACE TO THE BOTTOM

The ABG Shipyard scam is the latest addition to alleged cases of swindling and money laundering that have hit Indian banks over the past few years



Vijay Mallya

Liquor and airline baron (United Breweries and Kingfisher Airlines)

The case: Owes **Rs 9,000 crore** to 17 Indian banks. Accused of fraud and money laundering.

Banks: SBI, Punjab National Bank, IDBI, Bank of India and Bank of Baroda, among others



Nirav Modi; Mehul Choksi

Founder, Nirav Modi chain of diamond jewellery retail stores; Promoter, Gitanjali Gems

The case: In the **Rs 14,000 crore** scam, Modi and Choksi allegedly availed credit from overseas branches of Indian banks through fraudulent guarantees

Bank: PNB



Chanda Kochhar; Deepak Kochhar

Former MD & CEO of ICICI Bank; Founder, NuPower Renewables

The case: Chanda Kochhar is accused of receiving a kickback through her husband from Videocon for sanctioning loans. She allegedly approved a loan worth **Rs 3,250 crore** for Videocon in 2012 for a deal that concerned NuPower Renewables.

Bank: ICICI Bank



Rana Kapoor

Co-founder, Yes Bank

The case: Kapoor was arrested by the Enforcement

Directorate in March 2020 in an alleged money laundering and banking fraud involving **Rs 4,300 crore**

Bank: Yes Bank



Rakesh and Sarang Wadhawan

Promoters, HDIL

The case: They were arrested in October 2019 by the Economic Offences Wing of Mumbai Police for alleged involvement in the **Rs 6,000 crore** Punjab and Maharashtra Coop Bank fraud.

Bank: PMC Bank



Vikram Kothari

Promoter, Rotomac

The case: Kothari was arrested in February 2018 by the CBI for allegedly cheating a

consortium of seven banks of **Rs 3,695 crore**. Released on bail.

Banks: A consortium of seven banks led by Bank of India

registered a case against ABG Shipyard executives, suspecting use of shell companies to divert public money.

According to the SBI, which has been handling ABG Shipyard's account since 2001, the company diverted the loan money to its related parties and made huge investments in its overseas subsidiary between 2005 and 2012. 'The loan amount was restructured under the Corporate Debt Restructuring (CDR) mechanism on March 27, 2014. However, the operations of the company could not be revived,' reads the SBI's February 14 statement.

Too many fault lines

ABG Shipyard has been on the radar of lenders ever since its financial troubles began. The SBI appointed an auditor, N.V. Dand and Associates, on September 10, 2014, to conduct a stock audit of ABG Shipyard. In its report submitted in April 2016, the auditor found various faults on the part of ABG Shipyard. On July 20, 2016, the company's account was declared an NPA with effect

**THE OFFENCE
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BY AUDITING
FIRM EY**

from November 30, 2013. The lenders appointed EY in April 2018 to conduct a forensic audit, covering the period between April 2012 and July 2017.

EY's forensic audit report, submitted on January 18, 2019, elaborated on how ABG Shipyard routed the loan money by paying it to related parties. The money borrowed from banks was also used to repay loans and foot expenses of group companies and for letters of credit. Broadly, there were four instances of misappropriation or diversion of funds. The first was when Rs 1,415 crore was transferred through vendors and group companies and "round-tripped" back to the company. Round-tripping refers to a series of transactions that involve circulation of money across jurisdictions, culminating in its return to the jurisdiction of origin, usually as foreign investment. ABG Shipyard transferred Rs 603 crore to One Ocean Shipping Pvt Ltd and another Rs 812 crore to ABG Engineering & Construction, both part-

ner companies. Second, ABG Shipyard invested in \$43.5 million (Rs 326 crore) worth of securities of ABG Singapore, its overseas arm. According to EY's forensic audit, the money may have been siphoned out of the system. Third, ABG Shipyard transferred Rs 83 crore to related firms. But the assets were not shown as part of the company's asset pool. ABG Shipyard paid accommodation deposits of Rs 83 crore to entities before 2007-08. One of them is Somerset Estate Pvt Ltd, which was paid Rs 14 crore. Agarwal stays in the Somerset property in Mumbai.

'Properties were purchased out of security deposits provided by ABG Shipyard in 2007-08 and 2008-09,' according to the EY report. ABG Shipyard had transferred Rs 15 crore and Rs 16 crore to ABG Energy on March 15 and 16, 2016, respectively. On the same days, ABG International, ABG Shipyard's corporate guarantor, received Rs 31 crore as refund of accommodation deposits. This 'indicates there may not be actual refund of accommodation deposits amounting to Rs 31 crore, and only potential circular transactions', the report states.

Finally, the SBI alleges that ABG Shipyard conducted a breach of the restructuring agreement.

Under restructuring, lenders set up a trust and retention account (TRA). The money coming into the company during the restructuring period is held in the TRA so that lenders can monitor its use. The SBI says more than 50 per cent of ABG Shipyard's receipts had been outside this arrangement. ABG International is the holding company over which directors/ relatives are able to exercise control or significant influence. Neither the EY report nor the FIR gives details of the entire Rs 22,842 crore siphoned off, but experts say further investigations are likely to unearth more such money trails. These 'illegal acts committed by the accused constitute cognisable offences under the Indian Penal Code, and the same are committed by the accused with specific intention to cause loss to banks who had sanctioned credit facilities and to gain unlawfully at the cost of the banks', the EY report concludes.

As efforts to revive the company through the CDR scheme failed, the firm filed for liquidation under the Insolvency & Bankruptcy Code (IBC) in 2019. The liquidation process is on. However, lenders hope to get very little from the proceedings. The firm has a few land parcels, bungalows, staff quarters, half-finished vessels and plant and machinery, but these are likely to fetch only a fraction of the original

claims by the lenders. The value of ABG Shipyard's land assets is reportedly close to Rs 500 crore.

The EY report came as a shot in the arm for the SBI. However, the road ahead was not easy. The SBI's fraud identification committee took five more months to declare the ABG Shipyard account as a fraud on June 6, 2019. The bank approached the CBI with a complaint on November 8, 2019, but the CBI sought some clarifications on March 12, 2020, to corroborate the allegation of fraud. The agency had stated that no internal investigation was conducted before filing the complaint. According to the CBI, the complaint did not provide the timing of the fraud, specific instances of siphoning of funds or the modus operandi in

defrauding the banks. Also, there was no consent from the other banks in the consortium for filing the complaint. The fact is that except for consent from other banks, all conditions were fulfilled by the SBI before filing the complaint.

The consortium, in meetings of its shareholders between June 4 and August 13, 2020, gave consent for filing the complaint. There seem to be several cardinal failures in this case, the most important being that the fraud was not detected on time. According to banking consultant Ashvin Parekh, "Banks should develop internal mechanisms to keep track as to who the funds are paid to and what the borrower is doing with them." The bank's relationship manager should know when to alert the bank to stop giving fresh funds in case of doubts about their use. "All defaults should be immediately brought to the regulator's attention and recovery actions must be initiated," Parekh adds.

A blame game started soon after the FIR was registered. Congress general secretary Randeep Surjewala claimed on February 13 that his party had warned

the Union government in 2018 that ABG Shipyard was a scam. He asked why the government had taken so long to act. Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, however, maintained that the firm's account had turned an NPA in 2013 during the Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) regime.

ABG Shipyard is only the latest scam to rock India's banking sector. While the case against Agarwal and his associates will drag on, what will be crucial is how the government plugs loopholes in the financial system to prevent misappropriation of funds. Without robust checks and balances, frauds will continue to happen and taxpayers' money will remain at risk. ■



**INDIAN BANKS
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BE IMMEDIATELY
REPORTED TO THE
REGULATOR"**

ASHVIN PAREKH

Banking consultant



देश का नं. 1 हिंदी न्यूज़ ऐप

जुड़े रहिए हर खबर से,
कहीं भी, कभी भी

अभी डाउनलोड करें

aajtak.in/app

उपलब्ध है



A young boy with dark hair and a yellow shirt is looking out from behind vertical metal bars. He is holding onto one of the bars with his right hand. The scene is dark, suggesting it is nighttime. A glowing, multi-colored star decoration is visible through the bars, hanging from a string. The star has points that are lit with blue, green, and red lights. The background is a dark, textured wall.

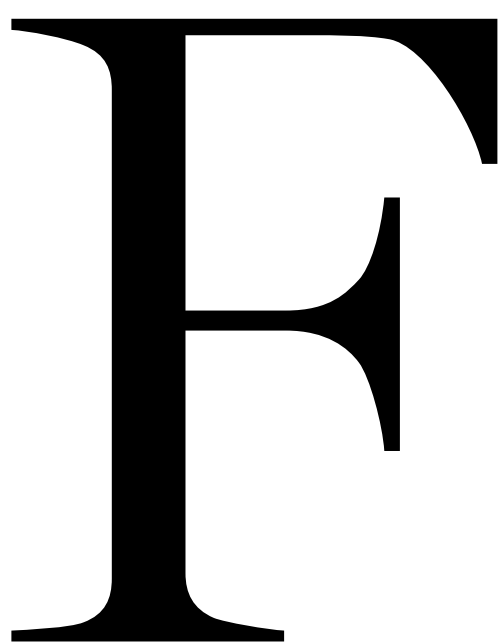
**BROODY ISOLATION DURING COVID
MANIFESTED IN COGNITIVE DECLINE,
PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ILLNESS
AMONG MANY CHILDREN**



Covid's Troubled Children

They have paid a high price for safety in the pandemic. As they return to school, how do we compensate for the two lost years of schooling and childhood?

By **SONALI ACHARJEE** / Photographs by **BANDEEP SINGH**



Four-year-old Devyani (*name changed*) could hardly contain her excitement when told she would be going to school on February 21. She had joined kindergarten last year in a South Delhi school, but could attend classes only online, where she would first greet her teacher and then every one of her classmates. However, when her father took her to first day of school and her class teacher came out to meet her, Devyani shrank back, and asked her father, “Where did she come from?” Having seen her teacher only on a computer screen, the young child had trouble dealing with her in person.

Covid wasn’t easy for eight-year-old Tara (*name changed*) either. While her architect parents were busy working from home, she would kill time watching cartoon shows and consuming packet after packet of chips, biscuits, Maggi noodles and other junk food. By the time her parents realised their daughter had a problem, she had piled on a whopping 10 kilos during the lockdown. “It affected her studies and she became reluctant to attend online classes,” recalls her mum. “When we took her to the doctor and had blood tests

done, we were told she was low on several vitamins and essential minerals.” Putting Tara on a healthy diet proved a big challenge—junk food had become the lonely child’s comfort food.

In Mumbai, 12-year-old Aditya (*name changed*) grappled with a problem of a different sort during Covid. When he had an argument with a classmate at Bombay Scottish, the latter blocked Aditya on all social media—Whatsapp, Facebook and Instagram. “Offline, I could have found a way to speak to him and clear the air,” says Aditya. Meanwhile, his younger brother Abhay read up so much on Covid on the smartphone his dad gave him that he started having nightmares. “He became so scared of Covid he would not let us eat outside food,” says his mum Divyangana, who had a hard time battling one child’s depression and the other’s fears.

Covid may be receding, but the scars it has left behind on Gen Alpha—children born strictly in the decade just gone by—may well be permanent. You could just as well call them Generation Covid, given that the SARS-CoV-2 virus hijacked almost the entire Greek alphabet. They seem to have paid the heaviest price for safety during the pandemic, and even as things return to normality, or a new normal, if you will, their lives will forever be coloured by the alternate reality they have inhabited in the past two years.

Schools in India have been closed for 100 weeks since the lockdown in March 2020, though some schools and higher classes opened intermittently. It left close to 250 million children affected, as a 2021 Unicef study for India estimated, whether in learning outcomes or emotionally, physically and socially—manifesting in disturbed sleep patterns, increased anxiety, eating disorders or deficiencies in social skills.

Two groups of children were most seriously affected, according to Dr Hirak Patel, a psychologist at the Fortis Hospital in Mulund, Mumbai. The first, she says, were those who had never been to school. With the foundation of their learning and socialisation beginning on a screen, they never got to experience the excitement of a classroom or sharing in group activities on the



MOST CHILDREN SAY THEY MISSED THEIR FRIENDS, WHETHER STUDYING WITH THEM IN THE CLASSROOM OR PLAYING WITH THEM OUTDOORS

playground. The second group of children belonged to those in their formative years of learning who found themselves being denied access to the familiarity, comfort and experience of a classroom. Patel believes Covid would have left a lasting impact on children in both categories. “Our brains develop only as we grow older,” she says. “At a very young age, say under 10, it is harder for the mind to understand or accept why one has to stay indoors and not meet friends or teachers.” And when these children do meet in-person, the altered context leaves them completely unprepared. Like six-year-old Poorva (*name changed*), who had spoken to her schoolmates only on Zoom, and was horrified when she finally met them in real life at a Christmas party in 2021. Her mother, Sapnaa Malhotra, a 41-year-old homemaker in Mumbai, recounts how her daughter found it so strange to see people from her screen in front of her that she began to cry and stammer. “We had to do a Zoom call and show her that the people at the party were the same as those on the screen. It has

been very difficult for a child to grow up in a world where masks and video calls were the norm for two whole years,” she says.

The Learning Curb

While the hyper leap to online learning possibly did wonders for the government’s digital push in education, like all transitions, and one inspired by necessity to boot, this one too was not without its share of pain. “I found it difficult to concentrate when I was studying online,” 12-year-old Shaurya Gupta, a student of the Amity School in Noida, told us. “My grades were still good but I felt I was more productive and happier when I was actually in school.” He missed his friends, whether it was studying in the classroom with them, or playing outside.

Educators too found themselves technologically handicapped, and the students struggling with uneven internet connections. Besides, as Radhika Sinha, principal of the Aditya Birla World Academy in Mum-

How to de-stress your child

Is your child showing signs of academic stress?

Mumbai-based psychologist **HIRAK PATEL** has tips on how to handle the crisis



Exercise

Physical fitness impacts academic outcomes. Some daily movement and exercise are highly recommended



Regulate sleep

Reduce screen time for children at night so that they can have a regular and sufficient sleep cycle



Manage diet and nutritional profile

A healthy and balanced diet improves mood and also helps in cognitive development



Seek professional advice

If there are signs of serious distress, children should be introduced to a counsellor for professional support



Focus on positive experiences

Meeting friends, family meals and recreational time are some examples of how a positive atmosphere can be created at home

bai, says, “Nothing can replace the human touch—the physical presence of a teacher in a classroom full of students.” It was, therefore, just a matter of time before the gaps started showing in learning outcome studies. The Unicef survey, for instance, revealed that nearly 75 per cent of parents of 5-to 13-year-olds with access to digital devices said their children had been learning less than in physical classroom settings; likewise, 80 per cent students between the ages of 14 and 18

reported lower levels of learning when education went online. Researchers at the Azim Premji University, in a 2021 survey of 16,067 children in Classes 2-6 in 1,137 government schools in five states, found that 92 per cent of the students on an average had lost at least one specific language ability and 82 per cent at least one specific mathematical ability over the previous years. The latter included identifying single- and two-digit numbers, performing basic arithmetic operations

and using them to solve problems, describing 2D/ 3D shapes, or reading and drawing inferences from data.

Nearly all experts agree that the greatest challenge in online education was the absence of personalised interaction and innovation. “Offline learning itself poses challenges, where a one-size-fits-all model has scant regard for the diverse learning needs of children,” says Rajesh Bhatia, educationist, founder and CEO, Treehouse Education, a pre-school group in Mumbai. Online education came with its own set of challenges. In Rapid Surveys conducted by Oxfam India, 84 per cent of the teachers in government schools admitted that they found it difficult to deliver education through remote mediums. Worse, they were unable to build emotional connects with their students or carry out meaningful assessments of their learning abilities.

“An online class does not just happen,” says Sinha. “It’s far tougher to keep students engaged on a virtual window; every activity has to be thoughtfully planned. It’s crucial to design a lesson that is both functional and relatable.” Lessons could not be content-heavy as that would make them monotonous. The learning experience had to be both appealing and also spark the learner’s imagination. “It was a very steep learning curve for many schools,” says Vishnu Karthik, director, Heritage Group of Schools, Delhi NCR, and CEO, Xperiential Learning Systems. A lack of resources and institutional support compounded the problem. Consequently, most schools ended up delivering the same monologic lessons facing the computer rather than the children.

According to Father Mathews K. Thomas of Don Bosco School, Delhi, and member of the CBSE Educators’ Forum, in a class with a heterogeneous group of students, online teaching benefitted two kinds of students—the good ones and the weaker students. It gave good students, or those who could grasp concepts faster, time to do other things. The high cut-offs for college admission reflected the trend. “For weaker students,” says Fr Mathew, “a recorded online class could be played ‘n’ number of times to clear doubts. Those who would earlier scrape through with pass marks showed improvement from 50–60 per cent to 70–80 per cent.” It was the average student, those with no particular ambition, who fell between the two extremes, and who showed the greatest gap in learning, according to the educator.

Assessment was another area that online education failed to find a suitable answer for. It was difficult for many schools to ascertain exactly how much a student had learnt. In the absence of fair and quality testing, schools and parents were unable to identify the learning gaps in their children. Using unfair means became routine. Some schools, like South Point in Kolkata, adopted stringent methods such as proctoring by 14

“IT’S FAR TOUGHER TO KEEP STUDENTS ENGAGED ON A VIRTUAL WINDOW. EVERY ACTIVITY HAS TO BE THOUGHTFULLY PLANNED”

RADHIKA SINHA, Principal, Aditya Birla World Academy, Mumbai



teachers with special devices, monitoring of windows and built-in authentication of question papers. Yet some students managed to beat the system. “We came across students who were facing the camera and ostensibly writing the exam but who actually had their private tutors helping them out,” Jaidev Ghosh, vice-principal of the school, revealed. The school then got innovative in setting its questions, using diagrams, pie charts and geometrical constructions in mathematical problems, the answers to which could not be sourced from Google or other search engines.

Food for Sloth

Apart from learning disabilities among children, Covid confinement, loneliness and the lack of physical activity led to a rise in consumption of junk food. Junk food consumption among children was already high before the pandemic—a 2019 study by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) of 13,274 children aged 9–14 showed that 93 per cent ate packaged food, 68 per cent consumed packaged sweetened beverages more than once a week, 53 per cent ate these products at least once a day. And though there is no specific data on the rise of junk food consumption among children during Covid, there are enough global studies to suggest that this was indeed the case and would have been so in India too. This, in turn, led to a rise in cases of obesity, which had an impact on mental capacity too. “Physical activity is vital as it releases positive hormones,” says Dr Barkha Pandey, a paediatrician at the Manipal Hospital in Delhi. A 2021 survey of 18,000 Delhi kids by Sportz Village Schools, a sports education organisation, revealed that over 51 per cent of the kids had unhealthy BMI (body mass index, a measure of an individual’s health and weight), meaning that every second child was overweight post the lockdown.

Global research also shows that children with good social-emotional skills also perform better academically, have stronger friendships and familial ties and tend towards positive thoughts and behaviour. “School

The Rural Divide

A recent report that studied 1,362 underprivileged schoolchildren across 15 states confirmed something we had all suspected. The School Children's Online and Offline Survey (the SCHOOL survey), released in August 2021, established that poor children in rural India had suffered the most in terms of the disruption of their education during the pandemic. The school dropout rate in rural India was as high as 37 per cent in 2020–2021. The survey also found that 51 per cent of people in villages have access to a smartphone as compared to 77 per cent in urban areas, and the proportion of children regularly studying online is 15 per cent in

villages and 31 per cent in cities.

As per the SCHOOL survey, only 8 per cent of the children were regularly studying via online classes in rural areas and 37 per cent were not studying at all. Among the primary causes was a lack of access to devices.

"The number of dropouts is as high as 50–60 per cent among those in classes IX and XI since they don't have a board exam to appear for," said Apratim Chatterjee, headmaster of Baksara High School in Howrah. "But even for class X and XII, the number of absentees was, on an average, 30 per cent. We couldn't blame the students. When we visited the homes of some of the dropouts, we saw that the home environment

was just not conducive to studying. For example, they were living in cramped rooms inhabited by four to six family members. And though the family had a smartphone, it had to be shared with all other family members."

As per the 'Report on the Status of Education India 2020–21', a study by the firm Indian Researcher, "In the 6–10 age group, one out of every 20 students does not attend school. In secondary classes, it is one out of every 10 students". The survey was designed to see if the 'new normal' in the education system is creating a massive divide between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The well-off seem to be getting wealthier in terms of access to educational gadgets,

database, learning apps, while the poor, denied such privileges, are getting poorer. As per a survey done by the NGO Child Fund India, 64 per cent children have expressed an intent to drop out if not provided additional educational support.

Take the case of Debkanta, a bright class XII student of Baksara High School, who suddenly stopped attending classes for the 2021–22 academic year, prompting his teachers to visit his home. They found that the pandemic had reduced Debkanta's father's earnings by half, forcing this promising student to take up a job as a mechanic at a repair service company for TVs, ACs and fridges. Debkanta was

is a place where, along with academic learning, children also develop skills such as empathy, friendships, imagination, respecting personal space, taking turns, listening to others as well as socially acceptable behaviour patterns," says Dr Sapna Bangar, psychiatrist and head, Mpower-The Centre, Mumbai. "You only had to attend an early or primary year online class during Covid to see teachers struggling to get children to follow instructions. What else could one expect from children who have never experienced school life and do not have a benchmark to fall back on?" Online education also restricts sensory learning to some extent and impacts the social-emotional development of students. "The need for social contact and connect is a basic human need, the lack of which is likely to lead to lop-sided personality development with poor social skills," says Karthik.

With both parents juggling work and household responsibilities during the lockdown, children very often were left

to their own devices—phones, tablets and what have you. According to an OLX India survey in 2021, screen time for children in the 5-to-15-year age group shot up 100 per cent since the first lockdown and 84 per cent of the parents were worried about the increase in their children's screen time. And excessive screen time has been reported to be associated with psychological issues, low emotional stability, and greater risk of depression or anxiety. Kids also have access to smartphones from a very young age these days. A 2021 study by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) found that kids as young as eight had their own personal smartphones, with only 10 per cent using them for learning and 60 per cent using them for chatting. In eight-year-old Madhav's (*name changed*) case, smartphone dependence wreaked havoc on his



DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

SMALL INCENTIVE Students of a Kolkata Municipal Corporation school line up for meals during Covid

contributing Rs 17,000 a month towards household expenses, thereby helping his family survive the pandemic. The teachers stepped in though, and requested his employers to hold on to his position while Debkanta took some time to appear for his class XII board exams.

Electricity and connectivity remained big challenges. A National Statistical Office (NSO) survey conducted in the 2017-18 academic year had discovered that

around 85 per cent of households (rural and urban combined) had no access to a computer (desktop) and around 72 per cent had no access to the internet. More specifically, 92 per cent of rural households in India had no access to a computer and 80 per cent had no access to internet. In states like Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura and West Bengal, 72-80

per cent had no access to the internet as against the national average of 71.7 per cent. The Indian Researcher survey found that while 43 per cent of students of government schools had no access to digital means of education, 45 per cent of students, mostly first-generation learners, got no educational assistance and support. "Frankly, the worksheets couldn't be assessment indicators. We could easily make out they were not the handiwork of students. Some sheets

were just photocopies bearing names of friends or tutorials, which helped solve the questions. Students and parents were more interested in knowing when the mid-day meal ration would be available, rather than when school would physically open. I don't blame them either, with poor network connections and children helping parents out with farm work or domestic chores, the existing arrangement worked fine," said Soumen Das Thakur, a teacher of a school in West Midnapore.

This was the reason several states had been stressing on the urgency to reopen schools. Otherwise, they felt, the learning gaps would become too large to mend, causing higher dropout rates and related social problems, like youth violence, child marriage and even human trafficking.

—Romita Datta

“AS THE PANDEMIC PROGRESSED, CONSTANTLY READING RUMOURS ONLINE CREATED PANIC AMONG YOUNG CHILDREN”

DR UPASANA CHADDHA
Founder, Mindscape Counselling



sleep pattern. His engineer father Charun had to eventually confiscate the Pune-based boy's phone after discovering how he felt compelled to check his phone every few hours. "So much so that one night I found him hunting for his phone at 3 am," says Charun. It began with Facebook Messenger, which he initially used to compare notes with friends after class. Later, he was hooked to social media to the point that he had to seek counselling to ease his social media addiction.

Social media was indeed a major source of anxiety among children during Covid. In a study titled 'Covid-19 and its impact on education, social life and mental health of students', published in *PMC Journal*, a survey of 1,182 students from different educational institutes in Delhi revealed that nearly 70 per cent were suffering from anxiety about the pandemic. "Constantly reading rumours online created panic among young children," says Dr Upasana Chaddha, psychologist and



“MY 6-YEAR-OLD REALLY MISSED ATTENDING PHYSICAL SCHOOL WHERE SHE HAD THE CHANCE TO PLAY AND MAKE FRIENDS”

MANPREET SINGH

Instagram influencer, and Chandigarh-based parent

founder of Mindscape Counselling in Delhi.

And it was not just Covid anxiety, but also their parents' fears and insecurities children had to deal with. “The parents' anxieties got transferred to the children—loss of jobs or incomes, long WFH hours, erratic routines, domestic violence,” says Chandana Bakshi, a mental health consultant at SWAYAM, a charitable public trust that works for a violence-free, gender-equal and women-empowered society.

While some children battled loneliness, others resented the helicopter parenting of WFH couples. “Children who earlier had breathing space between classes, conversations with friends in school, had hypervigilant parents monitoring every activity of theirs, whether on WhatsApp, Facebook or chat,” says Bakshi. Dr Chaddha, though, finds nothing wrong in parents monitoring their children's online activities. “Especially as they were in front of a screen for a longer time due to schools being closed,” she says. “A line here or an image there can cause deep stress in young minds.”

Data by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) revealed that there was a 21 per cent increase in suicides by students (classified as children between four and 17 years of age) in 2020 over the previous year. An estimated



12,526 students committed suicide, with Odisha recording a 287 per cent increase over the previous year. The helplines run by the NGO Roshni in Delhi, which counsels students having suicidal thoughts, reported a spike of 26 per cent in calls from under 20-year-olds in 2020 from the year before.

Aware of the growing instances of mental stress, some educational institutes opened emergency helplines. “We started a 24x7 helpline to counsel students as instances of domestic violence started going up,” says Ghosh. Domestic disruption had a direct impact on the lives of students and consequently their studies. Earlier, school would offer a means of release, the six hours spent there allowing an opportunity to share their problems with friends. The broody isolation during Covid manifested in cognitive failure, physical and mental illness.

Life after Covid

Now, as life returns to normal, with the majority of the population doubly vaccinated and schools reopening, will it also mean closing the door on the problems associated with Covid? The lockdown allowed children to



A JUNK FOOD DIET, COUPLED WITH LACK OF EXERCISE, AFFECTED CHILDREN'S MENTAL AND PHYSICAL ABILITIES

learn new skills, cultivate fresh hobbies, and spend more time with their families. The interactive nature of online learning helped shy and introverted children to emerge from their shells. "The actual value of something is best realised when one imagines being deprived of it. If there was no online learning to fall back on, one wonders how the past two years would have panned out," says Karthik.

Some parents, too, expressed satisfaction with what online learning did for their children. "My children got more personalised attention. Earlier, they were just another face in the class," says Pune-based entrepreneur Adarsh Patel, who has two children, aged 7 and 9.

As we move towards a post-Covid world, experts recommend a hybrid model of learning, combining the best of both worlds. Modern schooling, says Sugata Mitra, educational theorist and founder of the Hole-in-the-Wall project, a TED-prize winning experiment in self-learning, was developed 200-odd years ago under the British empire. The system was designed to be unidirectional, from the teacher to the students, who are then tested on what they learn. "Its purpose back then was to produce clerks and

civil servants," he says. "Today, memorisation of facts isn't as important as accessing, understanding, and applying knowledge. With the rise of the internet, students have to start thinking critically when given the tools and triggers for learning, in classrooms where education is collaborative, not one-directional." Hole-in-the-Wall has already shown the way. In 1999, it placed a computer in front of children with no previous computing experience in a slum in Delhi. Through group learning, the children figured out how to use the machine on their own. "When the human mind figures out something on its own, it retains that learning for much longer and applies the knowledge more effectively," says Dr Nimesh Desai, psychiatrist and director of the Institute of Human Behaviour and Allied Sciences in Delhi.

Expert after expert has also advocated making affordable education accessible to all children, plugging the digital gap and customising hybrid models to cater to the diverse needs of students. With the pandemic having lasted two years, a majority of the parents have been keen for schools to reopen. However, concerns remain, both among parents and children, about the unvaccinated status of the under-15 children. Dr Anil Sachdeva, a paediatrician at the Sir Ganga Ram Hospital in Delhi, says most of his patients want to get their children vaccinated so that they can return to school. Mumbai student Akash Khattar, 15, took his vaccination almost as soon as the programme was opened to those between 15 and 18 years so that he could attend his tuition classes in person. "I would like to score well in my final year so that I can go to a good college and have a secure and happy future," he says. "I could not go outside as I have elderly grandparents. Now that I am vaccinated, my mother feels confident about letting me go."

Schools and teachers have been equally eager to have students back in the classrooms. To compensate for any learning losses, they are considering increased personalised tuition for students, special doubt-clearing sessions, regular assessments of their learning capacity and counselling sessions for those with lingering stress or anxiety. Realising the need for supplementary teaching and to build "a resilient mechanism for education delivery", the government in its budget this year expanded the 'one class-one TV channel' programme of eVIDYA from 12 to 200 channels. It also made a commitment to develop high-quality e-content in all spoken languages to be delivered through internet, mobile phones, TV and radio with the help of digital teachers.

Covid's children have, after all, have survived a biological Armageddon early on in life. Much of that trauma will hopefully fade, but before that happens, the next few years will have to be spent re-learning things we have long taken for granted. ■

—with **Romita Datta and Shelly Anand**

ENTRANCE TEST

Identity check for students
taking NEET in Bhopal

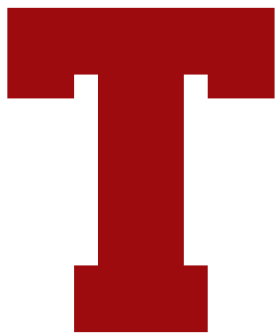


INVESTIGATION | **FAKE CANDIDATES**

THE IMITATION GAME

Fresh arrests reveal the growing trend of paid proxies taking medical or engineering entrance exams as unscrupulous agents seek out desperate students or their parents looking for a short-cut to admission in highly competitive courses

BY AMITABH SRIVASTAVA



There was not even a moment's hesitation when Sabita (*name changed*), 17, was asked to show her Aadhaar and admit cards at the St Francis Xavier's School in Varanasi. It was September 12, 2021, and the CBSE-affiliated school, located in the Sona Talab area of the temple city in Uttar Pradesh, was serving as one of the centres for the year's NEET or National Eligibility cum Entrance Test for medical admissions. Sabita was given entry, and allowed to write the exam.

It was only when she came out three hours later that police inspector Anjani Kumar Pandey stepped up to check on a few more details. Like where she took her Class 12 examination from. What was the name of her school principal? What could she tell them about Tripura, where she was from? How many rooms did her house have?

Three minutes into the interrogation and Sabita's façade crumbled. She was actually Julie Kumari from Patna, a second-year dental surgery student at the Banaras Hindu University. She had agreed to appear for the exam in place of Sabita for Rs 5 lakh, of which her mother Babita had already collected Rs 50,000 in advance. Both Julie and her mother, who was also at the exam centre while her daughter was writing the exam, were arrested. A fake Aadhaar card, NEET admit card, photographs, two mobile phones and other documents were also recovered from the duo. A day later, the police nabbed one Osama Shahid, 31, a final-year medical student at the King George's Medical University (KGMU) in Lucknow.

Shahid is now in judicial custody and is believed to be one of the masterminds of the 'fake candidate' racket along with Patna resident Neelesh alias PK, 40,

who is also in judicial custody, and Om Prakash Singh, 52, a B.Pharm degree holder once associated with KGMU, who was arrested on January 13 from Lucknow. In December, the cops had arrested Sabita and her father Gopal Biswas in Tripura, where he runs a drug store. Being a minor, Sabita is currently in a juvenile facility. Biswas confessed to having paid PK an advance of Rs 5 lakh, in return for helping Sabita 'crack' the NEET. The total deal was for Rs 50 lakh, and Biswas was to pay the remaining Rs 45 lakh after Sabita secured admission. Once PK received the advance, his accomplice Shahid arranged for Julie to appear for the exam as Sabita.

Examination by Proxy

Proxy candidates for prestigious examinations such as the NEET or JEE Mains for the IITs, or for recruitment exams for school teachers, constables, banks or railways, are as old as examinations themselves. With rampant unemployment and a premium on government jobs, clearing any of these exams is seen as a passport to lifelong financial security. And it is this desperation, especially in smaller towns and villages, that the swindlers feed into, helping them earn easy money.

The modus operandi is fairly simple. Talking of a demand side and a supply side, Varanasi police commissioner A. Satish Ganesh, elaborates: "The racket works at both levels. One group ascertains the demand by tapping coaching centres to procure data on candidates from well-off families who have failed to clear NEET in previous attempts. The second group works with medicos like Shahid to identify bright students in the first or second year of medical college from financially weak families."

Once a parent agrees to pay for a proxy to take the exam in place of their ward, he or she is asked to pay an advance. Post-dated cheques and the candidate's original Class 10 and 12 mark-sheets have to be deposited as security, which are returned after receiving the total payment of Rs 50 lakh.

CHEAT SHEET

Cheating in India is as old as examinations themselves—endemic, organised and elaborate

➤ **Impersonators can be found writing prestigious exams** such as the NEET and JEE Mains, as well as recruitment exams for school teachers, constables, bank officers and railways personnel

➤ **In 2021, FIRs were filed** against NEET impersonators in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan

➤ **Though there is no combined figure for the number of arrests** made for impersonation in examinations, according to the NCRB 2020 Crime in India report, 613 people were arrested for cheating by impersonation. 115 of these were up to the age of 30

➤ **1,283 cases are pending for investigation**, as per the NCRB report

➤ **The railways have filed over 200 FIRs** in the past five years against cheaters and impersonators in exams conducted by them in various states

➤ **Over 1,000 people, including 300 proxies, have been arrested in Bihar** in the past seven years

➤ **460 people were arrested in Bihar** in 2020 for impersonation during the statewide written examination for the recruitment of police constables

Documents are forged by photoshopping photographs of the candidate from copies of their e-Aadhaar. The gang used one Raju Kumar, who would take Rs 2,000 for each picture he morphed. He has now been arrested in Varanasi and his computer seized. User names and passwords are also obtained to make necessary modifications to get the desired examination centre.

The candidates themselves do not meet their proxies. “Middlemen like PK or Shahid handle everything, right from identifying an aspirant to hiring the impersonator,” says Ganesh. The proxies also do not appear for candidates from their own states. So Julie in Varanasi took the NEET for Sabita in Tripura, while DTU (Delhi Technological University) graduate Pradip Kumar wrote the 2020 JEE for Neel Nakshatra Das from Assam. Das secured 99.8 per cent marks and emerged as one of the toppers that year. The fame was short-lived—as the Assam police arrested Das and his doctor father in October 2020.

How the Crooks Crumbled

When interrogated, PK, Shahid and Singh confessed to arranging proxies for 25 aspirants for NEET 2021, although only 16 appeared as the rest developed cold feet and skipped the exam. The trio’s bank accounts show several transactions from different entities over the past few years. The Varanasi police have also seized copies of 15 admit cards, four photos, four cargo courier receipts, and two phones containing incriminating chats from Shahid and PK and admit cards, OMR (optical mark reader) sheets, cheques of different amounts and other documents from Singh.

Though there is no specific data to tell us how deep the rot runs, anecdotal evidence suggests it is more a rule than an exception. Over the years, the Calcutta-based CFPB or the Centre Finger Print Bureau, which falls under the aegis of the NCRB or the National Crime Records Bureau, has also unearthed cases of impersonation in various recruitment tests conducted by the Punjab National Bank, the central paramilitary forces, and the ordnance factory board. According to the Varanasi police, the fingerprints on the entrance forms of the 16 candidates who had proxies appearing for NEET were found to be different from those on the answer sheets.

The Varanasi police—given their limited jurisdictional mandate—were able to check just a few of the examinees. The National Testing Agency later withheld the results of 15 aspirants and banned one from appearing in the exam for two years. The police have already made arrests in Patna, Varanasi and Lucknow in this case.

However, the malaise runs across the country—from UP to Bihar to Haryana to Rajasthan to Madhya Pradesh, and even Tamil Nadu. If Julie was arrested in Varanasi, the



MODUS OPERANDI

The racket includes coaching staff and agents who scout for medical students willing to play proxies and ‘desperate’ candidates ready to shell out Rs 50 lakh for their ‘service’. A candidate seldom meets their proxies. Nor are they from the same state.



One group taps coaching centres to collect data on candidates from well-off families who failed to clear NEET in previous attempts. Another group works with senior MBBS students to identify bright 1st or 2nd-year medical students from financially weak backgrounds. Their families are contacted and an advance paid.



dated cheques and original Class X and XII mark sheets of the candidates as security which are returned after the remainder is paid, usually after the candidate secures admission.

Once a parent agrees to hire a proxy for his ward, he or she pays an advance of Rs 5 lakh on the total deal of Rs 50 lakh. They also deposit post-

The photographs of both the candidate (**Sabita**) and her proxy (**Julie**) were altered in Photoshop, as above.



THE RINGLEADER

Nilesh Kumar alias PK (in red jacket)
in police custody in Varanasi

CBI registered another FIR in September 2021 against one Parimal Kotpalliwar in Nagpur. The owner of an 'educational consultancy firm', he had allegedly arranged for five fake candidates to appear for NEET at four centres in Delhi and another in Ranchi. Likewise, the police in Rajasthan arrested one Rajan Rajguru, who allegedly stood second in the Rajasthan Pre-Medical Examination in 2010. He, too, was suspected of arranging a proxy for a NEET examinee. In 2021, the police also arrested Sandeep Saini in Ajmer, who was giving the examination for a NEET candidate in return for a fee. Six MBBS students of the Rajasthan University of Health Sciences (RUHS) and two students of a veterinary college and two kingpins were nabbed too.

In September 2019, CB-CID sleuths in Tamil Nadu arrested one Dr Venkatesh and his son Udit Suriya for having used a proxy for the NEET examination and getting admission into a medical college. Eight first-year students of medicine were arrested for recruiting proxies for NEET. Two brokers and seven parents, including a government doctor, were also taken into custody.

Then, of course, there is the long-running ghost of Vyapam, the scam that broke out in Madhya Pradesh in 2013, in which there were accusations of bribes being paid and proxy candidates being used to write the pre-medical tests for admission to medical colleges. The CBI has charge-sheeted over 3,100 accused in the scam so far. And based on the evidence, the trial courts have so far convicted about 100 accused in 36 Vyapam cases. On January 7, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) shared details of the five-year rigorous imprisonment awarded to the six accused—two impostors, two candidates and two middlemen—in the 2010 PMT conducted by Vyapam.

Failed Test

Already facing the challenges of an alleged leak of the 2021 question paper and criticism in a Tamil Nadu government-appointed committee report of the examination failing to

provide equal opportunity to all, NEET now has to grapple with the surfeit of cases of proxy candidates. The common entrance examination for admission to MBBS, BDS, BAMS, BHMS and other undergraduate medical courses in approved medical, dental, AYUSH and other colleges, a record 1.6 million candidates had registered for NEET last year at over 3,800 centres in 202 cities.

A similar can of worms emerged in the JEE Mains held between August 26 and September 1, 2021. The CBI raided 19 locations across Delhi-NCR, Pune, Jamshedpur, Indore and Bengaluru and identified at least 30 students who appeared, allegedly fraudulently, for the exam. The JEE Mains is held for admission to undergraduate engineering courses such as B.E./ B.Tech at the IITs, NITs, other CFTIs (centrally-funded technical institutions) and certain institutions or universities recognised by some state governments.

Fatal Fallout

In October 2021, Keerthivasan, a 20-year-old student from Tamil Nadu, took his own life for fear of failing NEET. He was the fourth student in the southern state to commit suicide after taking the 2021 exam.

According to NCRB data, as many as 2,080 students (1,147 male and 933 female) died by suicide in 2020 for fear of failing in examinations. Jharkhand topped the list with 325 suicides, followed by 287 in Maharashtra and 235 in MP. Fourteen suicides were reported specifically in connection with NEET, up from seven in 2019.

And while one cannot directly blame the fake candidates for this surge in suicides, they do contribute to candidates succeeding through fraudulent means at the cost of deserving ones. The illegal racket also helps produce professionals unfit to handle critical jobs.

Scamproofing Exams

There are several levels at which proxy candidates can be filtered. While it is easier for the impostors to get past the entrance test, evaluation and ranking, they can be caught at the counselling stage or while being given seats during actual admission to the allotted institution.

"While the examination system already has several layers of verification, including photographs, physiological and biometric identification, fraudsters do manage to slip past," says a police officer in Varanasi, on condition of anonymity. Meanwhile, Julie, an otherwise bright student who would top almost all internal tests, is cooling her heels in judicial custody. She may not be able to become a doctor after all. There can be no irony greater than that. ■



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NOW PLAYING HERSELF

THE WOMAN COMES INTO HER OWN ON OTT AS THE FORMAT GIVES SPACE TO THE FEMALE CHARACTER, WRITER, CREATOR AND DIRECTOR

By SUHANI SINGH



W

2017, stand-up comic Sumukhi Suresh pitched a show about a woman who is an obsessive romantic stalker. “I dreamt of playing the lead and not the lead’s best friend. But I was told I didn’t have the looks of a lead and asked whether I could carry a movie or show on my own,” says Suresh. “The only way to prove them wrong was to create my own show.” And soon enough there was *Pushpavalli*, in which Suresh explores a young woman’s insecurities about her appearance and the incongruity it breeds in her behaviour even as she made viewers laugh. The Amazon Prime Video series drew acclaim for daring to build a show around a messy heroine. Five years later, women-centric web shows are not such an oddity.

Pretty much every streaming platform has had a popular show anchored by an actress or bunch of actresses. Disney+ HotStar has had two seasons of both *Aarya* (Sush-

mita Sen) and *Out of Love* (Rasika Dugal) and recently released *Human*, a medical drama with Shefali Shah and Kirti Kulhari helming it; Amazon Prime Video will release the third season of *Four More Shots Please!* later in 2022 and, last year, SonyLIV’s *Maharani* had Huma Qureshi play a reluctant politician, with a career trajectory loosely reminiscent of Rabri Devi’s. In 2021, AltBalaji, which created one of the first women-centric series in the Nimrat Kaur-starrer *The Test Case*, dropped *The Married Woman*, exploring a lesbian relationship. Netflix has a whole shebang slated for 2022: new seasons of *She* (Aaditi Pohankar) and *Masaba Masaba* (Masaba Gupta) besides *The Fame Game*, Madhuri Dixit-Nene’s OTT debut, and *Mai*, featuring Sakshi Tanwar. Two months into 2022, ZEE5 has already released *Kaun Banegi Shikharwati* in January followed by crime thriller *Mithya* about



ALL THAT SASS (Clockwise from far left) Raveena Tandon in *Aranyak*; shot from *Kaun Banegi Shikharwati*; Samantha Akkineni in *The Family Man*



two women at odds, in February. A leading production company is set to launch an OTT platform next year that will specialise in “female forward content”. For Nimisha Pandey, chief content officer of ZEE5, it is “high time” that women get to dominate the narrative, given that they form a significant proportion of the OTT audience.

Ormax Media, a leading media analytics and consulting firm, estimates that women constitute 41 per cent of India’s 353 million digital video audience, with the ratio of male to female viewers nearly equal in the big metros. Ormax CEO Shailesh Kapoor notes that while viewership for action and crime series tends to be male, romance and romcom genres draw a more balanced audience, with 45 per cent of viewership coming from women.

NOT JUST WONDER WOMEN

Women have always been the focus on television, with shows like *Rajini*, *Tara*, *Shanti*, *Tu Tu Main Main* and *Hum Paanch* attracting a huge viewership.

The trend continues, with *Anupamaa* on Star Plus being the most-watched show currently. But the roles were restricted either to the *saas-bahu* stereotype or the traditionally-clad crusader. “For the longest time,” says Rangita Nandy of Prithvi Nandy Communications Ltd, the production company behind *Four More Shots Please!*, “we were reduced to stereotypes or just add-ons to the male protagonists. It is only in the past five years that we are getting to paint women characters in different colours without chasing the holier-than-thou prototype we were stuck with for years.” Not just that, heroes could do any wrong on television but still be romanticised. Women were strictly good or evil. “You never saw a flawed woman being loved rather than judged, before,” says Pandey. Streaming narratives have liberated

Almost every streaming platform has had a popular woman-centric show, be it Sushmita Sen-led **AARYA** (left) or Netflix’s **MASABA MASABA**



women from that prison, she adds, and led to the “acceptance of flawed characters, especially women”. Series creators are now freely exploring issues such as desire and sexuality, which were mostly taboo on family television.

Nandy calls OTT a “fabulously fertile time” for telling stories about women. Written and directed by women and labelled the desi *Sex & the City* by audiences, *Four More Shots Please! (FMSP!)* put a woman’s desire front and centre. The show’s success has led to Nandy being frequently asked to pitch a show in a similar lighter, urban chic landscape.

One undesirable fallout of women-centric scripts, however, is that most shows have become trapped in one genre—serious dramas. Conscious of that pitfall, Nandy has made the Cyndi Lauper classic ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’ a mission statement of sorts at PNC. “*FMSP!* dives into the dark but does not sink in it,” she says. “It’s a show that is fun and can be watched over a night of binge drinking. It is not trying to teach you something or say the world around you sucks.”

WOMEN ON TOP

The likes of Nandy are also finding themselves sharing ideas in a boardroom full of women. Content wings of at least four OTT platforms are spearheaded by women. If Pandey helms content at ZEE5, Tanya Bami heads the series slate for Netflix India, Aparna Purohit handles programming at Amazon Prime Video and Mrinalini Khanna is vice-president of originals at Lionsgate Play. Even their teams skew towards women. The female to male ratio in Bami’s creative team, is 70:30. “We are big proponents of the female-fronted show and organically go seeking female-forward narratives,” says Bami. According to her, 60 per cent of Netflix titles have women either leading the show or being central to the story.

With good reason, too. Women form a significant chunk of the OTT audience, but findings of ZEE5’s internal data and

SLATED NEXT...

THE FAME GAME

Netflix

A Bollywood superstar (**Madhuri Dixit-Nene**) goes missing and out come many inconvenient secrets from her closet. Producer Karan Johar has called the show a “complex family drama” that captures the “complexities and hidden realities” of the reel world. The show releases on February 25.



FARAR, Zee5

Zindagi has become a bankable platform of the feminist cause with Pakistani shows *Churails* and *Qatil Haseenaon Ke Naam*. They are adding to the narrative with a “coming-of-age story of three imperfectly perfect women”.

MAI, Netflix

Anushka Sharma’s production company Clean Slate’s new series centres on a 47-year-old wife and mother (**Sakshi Tanwar**) whose life turns upside down after she gets entangled in “a web of white-collar crime and dirty politics”. Co-starring Seema Pahwa, Raima Sen and Wamiqa Gabbi.



FOUR MORE SHOTS PLEASE! Amazon Prime Video

BFFs Damini (Sayani Gupta), Sidhi (Maanvi Gagroo), Umang (Bani) and Anjana (Kirti Kulhari) return for another season of love, mischief and a tiny bit of mayhem.



HUSH HUSH Amazon Prime Video

More '90s actresses take the OTT route. Juhi Chawla and Ayesha Jhulka feature in this thriller-drama which also includes Soha Ali Khan, Karishma Tanna, Shahana Goswami and Kritika Kamra. The women's crew includes Tanuja Chandra as creative director, Kopal Nathani as director and Juhi Chaturvedi (*Piku*, *Vicky Donor*) writing dialogues.



MAHARANI, SonyLIV

Huma Qureshi returns for season two of this political drama where she plays a chief minister who has to contend with patriarchy and misogyny and prove herself worthy of the chair.

strategy department show that they are not the only ones watching women-driven series. "Audiences are embracing strong, layered female characters, in whom they can find an authentic depiction of our environment and experiences," says Bami. Like Raveena Tandon in *Aranyak*, in which she plays a police officer juggling her ambition at work and responsibilities at home.

Pandey is not surprised that more shows are being commissioned around women. As the percentage of women writers, directors, creators and decision-makers goes up, so do chances to see them in front of the camera. "I am increasingly getting compelling stories with women wearing different hats or where you are seeing men and women at par, which means not having a single protagonist or having multiple ones," says Pandey.

Streaming has also given a new lease of life to actresses past their heyday on the big screen. "The industry has suddenly discovered that there are all these fabulous actresses who didn't get their due and are now available and eager [to work]," says Pandey. "That gives them an incentive to start thinking of those stories as well." This trend was reflected in INDIA TODAY's latest Mood of the Nation poll, where Tandon, Sushmita Sen and Pooja Bhatt featured among the top five OTT actresses.

LET'S GET LOUD

That environment is only encouraging creators like Suresh, who recently set up Motormouth, a content company that aims to develop shows and films "that women can love or hate but definitely relate to". Motormouth may be boxing itself in, but Suresh has heard enough stories of writers' rooms where women's opinions are sidelined or where men just back each other. "There is a vacuum, which is why I have to position myself like this," she says. "There's an abundance of male content, so you don't have to



“THERE IS A VACUUM. YOU WILL FIND ENOUGH MALE CONTENT, SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO BRAND IT THAT WAY. IT HAS BEEN THE NORM. FOR US [WOMEN] TO BECOME THE NORM WILL TAKE SOME TIME”

SUMUKHI SURESH

Award-winning writer, showrunner, stand-up comedienne and actress

brand it that way. It's been the norm. For us [women] to become the norm will take some time."

Suresh intends to cut short that time by writing more "three-dimensional female protagonists". Having earned her chops as a woman with a funny bone, she and her women-leaning writers' room have their hands full with a range of projects. "I think there is space to say some of the most obvious things—that women can be allowed to make mistakes, to be weird and not be symbols of righteousness," she says. Motormouth's line-up includes a stand-up special by Sumaira Shaikh titled *Dongri Danger*, a young adult comedy thriller, a feature for *Veere Di Wedding* producer Rhea Kapoor and a spinoff show on Vasu, a popular character on *Pushpavalli*. Even as Suresh champions the female voice, she is at pains to point out that streaming platforms are not blindly green-lighting women-centric content. "They want a good story," she says.

Only it's more likely that these 'good stories' revolve around women. As Bami says, "There's no force more powerful than a woman determined to rise. Put it in a story, and it will stay with the audience." ■



BRIDGING THE GAP
Pehlay Akshar programme
director Radha Goenka
with her young wards

One letter *at a time*

Hundreds of children are learning spoken English in government schools across Mumbai, and it's opening up new worlds for them

By **SHWWETA PUNJ**

An ninth grade student at the Worli Sea Face government school in Mumbai, Arushi Jha insists on responding to questions in English. She may be slow but she makes sure she uses the right words and grammar to communicate. Her favourite story these days is 'Otter Wisdom', where an otter meets fellow animals and learns and shares his wisdom. A whole new world of stories and literature has opened up for children of government schools in Mumbai who are part of the Pehlay Akshar program run by RPG Enterprises.

A brainchild of Radha Goenka, it

aims to fill the 'spoken English' gap for students who don't have the ecosystem to become fluent in the language. "Right to Education has been one of the country's most successful programmes with the mid-day meals scheme," says Goenka, who left her corporate job to start this initiative, and who is currently its programme director, "but we realised a lot of children were still leaving government schools because they couldn't cope. We wanted to bridge the gap in functional English." Goenka started the programme with a team of volunteers in 2008, but soon realised that for consistency and quality, she would have to build a team.

What makes me *happy*



Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

TIPS FOR HAPPINESS

STAY IN THE MOMENT:

Ninety-five per cent of what we call happiness can be achieved by just sitting for some time every day and focusing on the present. Make it a daily practice, something you can't do without, like eating food and drinking water. It is crucial to happiness.



**APOORVA
LOCHAN**

Mindfulness guru,
life coach and mentor

EXERCISE:

Your regular exercise routine should include workouts that promote flexibility, strength and cardio. A combination of these three keeps you in a high state where you are full of energy. One without the other doesn't have the same impact.

LIVE ETHICALLY: Happiness is impossible to experience in a sustainable manner if one does not live ethically.

DROP THE 'IF ONLY': The phrase or thought can make you miserable. Accept events as they unfold and you will be happy. A lack of 'acceptance' is one of the major causes of depression.

SPREAD MAITRI: Feel and send out feelings of goodwill, forgiveness, compassion and an assurance of harmlessness out into the universe. The Laws of Nature always send these back to you. When you do it with real intent, you will experience joy while doing it. It brings a tangible sense of bliss.

COMPASSION AND FORGIVENESS: Ayurveda emphasises that the cause of all ailments lies in the mind. Have compassion for every living being, including yourself, and especially for those who hurt you. Holding on to grudges or anger causes toxicity and, over time, we end up with chronic ailments.

GRATITUDE: An attitude of gratitude should be the first emotion in the morning and the last feeling at night. Don't chase the mirage of a pot of gold somewhere in the future.

-as told to Aditi Pai

The programme includes a curriculum, an app and training for school teachers. Jaswant Kaur, 55, at a Brihanmumbai Municipal School, is one of those who benefitted immensely from the training programme. Her formal education ended after Class 10, but she has now brushed up on her grammar and class management techniques through the training. Kaur says the children now enjoy the classes a lot more and she is referred to as an *angrez* on family WhatsApp groups as she responds in English.

Another teacher, Amina Shaikh, 52, says she improved her fluency in the language and is thankful that the programme was a "safe space with no judgments". She has been devouring articles on the Pehlay Akshar app—'Stay hungry, stay foolish' is her favourite quote. "The training modules try to understand the difficulties of the teachers who are not confident about speaking English. All teachers in Marathi and Hindi medium schools should adopt this programme," says Kiwade Patil, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) education inspector.

The programme's DIKSHA App has about 500 lessons, and there is also a collaboration with SCERT Maharashtra to televise 'English classrooms' across Maharashtra on DD Sahyadri. Goenka's aim is to now take the programme beyond Mumbai to rural areas in Maharashtra. Celebrities like Sunil Gavaskar and Sonakshi Sinha have volunteered to lend their voice to the 'A story a day' programme that started at the onset of the lockdown in 2020. So far, according to the company, the Pehlay Akshar program has reached 200,000 students, trained 7,000 teachers and is present in three states. It continues to be self-funded.

The students, too, have a new-found confidence. Vinayak Soni, an eighth standard student at Worli Sea Face school, says "speaking English is a big respect for me, I only speak in English when I am in class". He wants to become a software engineer. Vrudant, a 9th standard student at a BMC school in Mumbai, has enjoyed learning the language with the help of flash cards. He says he loves watching documentaries in English, *Man vs Wild* is an all-time favourite. His ambition is to become a pilot. And for that, he believes knowing English would be a big help. Call it a colonial hangover but fluency in the language continues to be associated with aspiration, ambition and a window to a bigger and better world. The Pehlay Akshar program is tapping into that inherent need "to be respected", as Soni puts it. ■

Happiness Quest: *A joint enterprise of India Today and the RPG Group celebrating exemplary initiatives to spread happiness*

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LEISURE

THE FLIP SIDE
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Q&A WITH MITHUN
CHAKRABORTY
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Two decades on from his first novel, **Pankaj Mishra** has swapped the bitter polemics of non-fiction for the ostensibly calmer shores of literary fiction

BOOKS

THE TRAGEDY OF THE MIMIC MEN

All of **PANKAJ MISHRA'S** writing is animated by a dichotomous desire—to deeply engage with the world, and yet be removed from it. His new novel is no different

ALAMY

P

LEISURE



RUN AND HIDE
by Pankaj Mishra
JUGGERNAUT
₹599; 336 pages

Pankaj Mishra used to be sort of famous, in certain circles, for being the editor who ‘discovered’ Arundhati Roy, getting her manuscript for *The God of Small Things* into the hands of an agent in London. Mishra himself had published a slight travelogue before his brief stint as an editor at HarperCollins India and would go on to publish a slight novel, about the sentimental education of a provincial and bookish young North Indian man in the Himachali hills.

The Romantics, Mishra’s debut novel, was an extension to a sparkling essay he published around the same time in *The New York Review of Books* (NYRB) about long, aimless days spent reading the formidable American critic Edmund Wilson and browsing the dusty stacks of the Banaras Hindu University library. Mishra’s association with the NYRB—the product of a convivial dinner in Delhi with its editor, Barbara Epstein—led to ‘Edmund Wilson in Benares’ and turned him on to reportage, and the long, searching intellectual inquiries for which, disappointingly, there has rarely, if ever, been space in Indian journals.

Since then, Mishra has ascended to the top rung of global writers, his books and reviews provoking angry, distinctly unaugust language in otherwise staid, august pages. The likes of Niall Ferguson and Jordan Peterson—academics who appeal to those

nostalgic for empire and patriarchy (as if these are no longer dominant forces, albeit in a different guise)—have been reduced to spittle-flecked tirades and issuing empty threats of legal and even physical reprisal. Others have made much of Mishra’s social ascent, through marriage, to the heart of the British establishment, as if this somehow undermined him as a voice from the ‘global South’.

Now, rather like Roy, two decades on from his first novel, Mishra has swapped the sound and fury, the bitter polemics of non-fiction and political engagement for the ostensibly calmer shores of literary fiction. His second novel, *Run and Hide*, is now out and, as with Roy, it is an expression of the themes that have run through all his work, whether memoir, essay, intellectual history, op-ed, or novel. For Mishra, the impulse that animates his writing is his desire to at once be wholly a part of this world and its noise and to retreat, monk-like, into silence

and meditation in the mountains.

Speaking down a Zoom line from London, Mishra acknowledges that fiction does enable him to “abandon the generalities of nonfiction” and to delve “more deeply into the particularities, the shapes of individual lives”. Returning to the novel has, he says, allowed him to “explore the full emotional potential” of a “whole storehouse of memories, of growing up in railway towns, for instance”, an experience of small-town India inaccessible, frankly, to most Indian literary novelists writing in English.

In Walter Benjamin’s famous essay, ‘The Storyteller’ (which Mishra mentions in our conversation), he writes of the “resident tiller of the soil” and the “trading seaman” and how audiences for tales will happily listen to either—he who has ranged far and wide and seen the strange and the new, and he who has stayed at home and “who knows the local tales and traditions”. Mishra is both, the man rooted to his spot, rapt by decay, by the mouldering effect of stasis, and the man forever on the move, restless and hungry for experience.

Arun Dwivedi, the narrator in *Run and Hide* (like Samar, the protagonist of *The Romantics*), is a sensitive, provincial man who seeks refuge, solitude and salvation in the mountains. Dwivedi is in retreat from the ravages of his small-town upbringing

MISHRA SAYS RETURNING TO THE NOVEL HAS ALLOWED HIM TO “EXPLORE THE FULL EMOTIONAL POTENTIAL” OF A “WHOLE STOREHOUSE OF MEMORIES, OF GROWING UP IN RAILWAY TOWNS, FOR INSTANCE...”

ing, the insecurity of poverty, the privations of class and caste uncertainty (his surname is the result of his father bribing a clerk) and the squalid memories of his time as a student at IIT Delhi. Early in the novel is a scene of unspeakable 'ragging'. His roommates, equally traumatised, respond in different ways—one, Aseem Thakur, becomes a priapic writer and media entrepreneur with more than a passing resemblance to Tarun Tejpal, and the other, Virendra, a Dalit, becomes a billionaire financier who is imprisoned for "insider trading, money-laundering and tax evasion". Virendra had been financing Aseem's magazine and conclaves of global thinkers. Reflecting on his benefactor's downfall, Aseem notes, in his florid, glib way: "The terrible thing about the trampled-upon darkies like Virendra is that their claim upon the richness of the world came too late. Just before we entered the endgame of modernity..."

Mishra hits upon an intriguing device for *Run and Hide*—Dwivedi's account is addressed to Alia, a privileged, well-educated Muslim woman who is writing the story of Virendra's fraud. Dwivedi is in love with her, and indeed the idea of her, the easy grace and confidence that is the birthright of the wealthy and upper class. The device offers Mishra a means to acknowledge the fragmented nature of Indian experience. "The question, 'Who are you writing for?'," Mishra says during our conversation, "obscures the fact that in India, unlike in cohesive societies, you can't count on a store of shared assumptions. Jane Austen didn't have to explain." If *Run and Hide* doesn't quite add up to the sum of its parts, it remains a revelatory picture of India's fractured, divided, profoundly troubling present. Who wouldn't want to run and hide? ■

—Shougat Dasgupta

BOOKS

DOING JUSTICE

K.R. Meera's recently translated novella, *Qabar*, deals deftly with matters of both state and heart



perfect book cover is rare enough that sometimes it's worth taking into account when judging a book.

This is true of the new English translation of K.R. Meera's 2020 novella, *Qabar*, adorned by a brilliant visual pun that encapsulates the dazzling double meanings and perspectives contained within. A green dome, the silhouette of a Muslim tomb, alludes to the title, but is also the calyx of an upside-down, dried-out 'Edward rose', the mysterious scent of which pervades *Qabar*'s pages. The tension between these two motifs, symbols of death and love, and the feeling of a world tumbling between irreconcilable realities, define this deftly told, disturbing yet bracingly magical tale.

The story begins with additional district judge Bhavana Sachidanand being thrown off balance in her courtroom by a plaintiff who seems to be using djinn-like powers to control her perceptions. Kaakkasseri Khayaluddin Thangal, a disconcertingly well-heeled 'hottie', fills the room with the scent of roses, causes rainbows to dance in the judge's eyes, and conjures up an intimidating spectre from the past. In the courtroom, the preservation of a *qabar* allegedly belonging to Thangal's ancestor, on land that has been sold to a charitable trust, is at the heart of the matter. But despite the weighty connotations of this conflict (the trust's name, Saketam, even alludes to Ayodhya), the story teeters over into matters of the heart.

For a judge, Bhavana is an emotional narrator, whose giddy voice translator Nisha Susan renders into English with zest. The single mother of a boy diagnosed with ADHD, Bhavana reveals that she spent most of her life stamping out her intelligence in deference to her former husband, and that she eventually became a judge because she would be assigned two assistants. We meet her mercurial son Advait, her self-absorbed ex-husband Pramod, her father who is addicted to TV serials, and her mother who lives independently with a clan of beloved street dogs. Beyond these exceptional but credible characters is Yogeshwaran

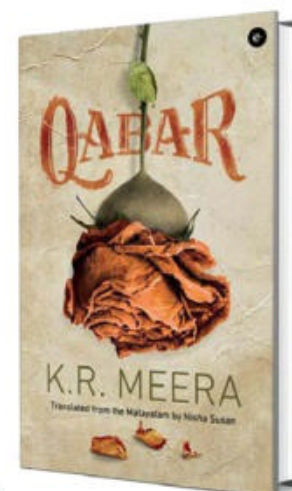
Ammavan, a fantastical ancestor who returned from Kashi after going there to die, bringing back with him two powerful young goddesses.

About Thangal, the mind-reader, we learn very little until a shocking revelation—dealt with in one line—late in the book.

Overwhelmed by her attraction to him, Bhavana pushes his religious identity off to the furthest corner of her narrative while focusing on the challenges she has faced as a woman in a conservative society. Meera plays with different kinds of vision throughout *Qabar*, masterfully capturing the con- signment of uncomfortable truths to the periphery, the kaleidoscopic experience of love or fear, and how prejudice often disguises itself as blind justice. Under the book's dust jacket is a gold rose embossed on a dull red cover—just one more of its unending layers. ■

—Sonal Shah

K.R. MEERA plays with different kinds of vision in *Qabar*, such as the kaleidoscopic experience of love or fear



QABAR
By K.R. Meera
(Translated by Nisha Susan)
EKA
₹399;
120 pages



Rintu Thomas and
Sushmit Ghosh



With Truth and Dare

DOCUMENTARIES

A new age of Indian documentary filmmaking has dawned and it is taking the world by storm



Shaunak Sen
(Director)



T

The stars seem to have aligned for India's documentary filmmakers of late. In the last week of January, Shaunak Sen's *All That Breathes* picked up the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize (Documentary) at the Sundance Film Festival 2022. A week later, Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh's *Writing with Fire* (2021) became India's first documentary to be nominated at the

Oscars. Thomas shared a clip on Twitter of Ghosh and herself listening to the nominations in real time. The disbelief and joy on their faces were altogether disarming. As Vinay Shukla, co-director of *An Insignificant Man* (2016), says. "It's been a long time coming!"

This recent euphoria doesn't, of course, negate an obvious fact—Indian non-fiction has been building up to a month like this. Anand Patwardhan's *Vivek* (English title: *Reason*) picked up the top prize at International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) only in 2018. But taking on the mantle from the likes of Patwardhan, Sanjay Kak or Lalit and Nilita Vachani is a new guard of filmmakers who seem assured enough to play with the form of

non-fiction to yield newer, different and interesting results.

Shaunak Sen's *All That Breathes*, for instance, follows the lives of two brothers and a young helper in East Delhi who help mend injured kites. The film begins with an exquisitely framed shot of rats in a garbage dump. Unlike his debut *Cities of Sleep* (2015), which adopted a hand-held vérité style, Sen wanted to try something different in his second film: "We wanted a more controlled, aestheticised framed kind of a style, something fluid. Thankfully, there was a cyclical nature to our days, so we could prepare our frames beforehand. I love this space of creative documentaries—using tools of fiction to shoot documentaries."



Khushboo Ranka and
Vinay Shukla



Even before the laurels of the past few years, India's non-fiction space was brimming with potential



Filmed during the 2020 Delhi riots and the anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) protests, Sen's documentary gives one the feeling that the capital is hurtling towards an apocalypse, but, in the end, what it really seems to document is the slow death of idealism in today's India.

SHOT TO FAME
(Clockwise from left) Stills from *Writing With Fire*, *An Insignificant Man* and *All That Breathes*

Writing With Fire almost seems like a counterpoint. It follows the lives of Dalit women working for *Khabar Lahariya*, a rural news network in Uttar Pradesh. "We met them in 2015—at an interesting point in their lives. After 14 years of being a newspaper, they were thinking of transitioning into digital. And most women in the reporting team had never touched a smartphone before," says Thomas. To imagine themselves as a digital force at that point, only "spoke of the resilience, acumen and chutzpah of these women".

Even before the laurels of the last few years, India's non-fiction space had been brimming with potential. Nisha Pahuja's *The World Before Her* (2012), Deepti Kakkar's *Katiyabaaz* (2013), Khushboo Ranka and Vinay Shukla's *An Insignificant Man* (2017) released in theatres and were acclaimed. Ranka is part of an accelerator called Indian Docs along with filmmakers Vinay Shukla, Shaunak Sen and Archana Phadke. They hope to help promising documentary projects with seed capital. "It's the most difficult money to raise, but it also ensures the most help for a filmmaker starting out," says Ranka. Indian Docs has two primary objectives—ensure more quality and speed up the process of bringing more films into active development.

Shukla says while political films are the need of the hour, we shouldn't burden non-fiction films by only associating them with politics/ activism. "*The Cinema Travellers* (2016) and shows like *Indian Matchmaking* (2020) are also examples of globally successful Indian non-fiction," he says. One can almost imagine the glee on Ranka's face when she speaks of how we have been looking to mainstream industries for an Oscar contender, but a documentary has made it instead. ■

—Tatsam Mukherjee

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

MUST-SEE SOUTH ASIAN DOCUMENTARIES

GHOSTS OF AFGHANISTAN (2021)

Afghanistan

Julian Sher's documentary follows Canadian journalist Graeme Smith as he offers a first-hand account of the Taliban takeover and how NATO failed Afghanistan and its women.



LONG PERIOD OF PERSECUTION (2019)

Bangladesh

Proshoon Rahman's documentary is one of the most thorough pieces of journalism on the Rohingya refugees, who were forced to flee Myanmar following a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

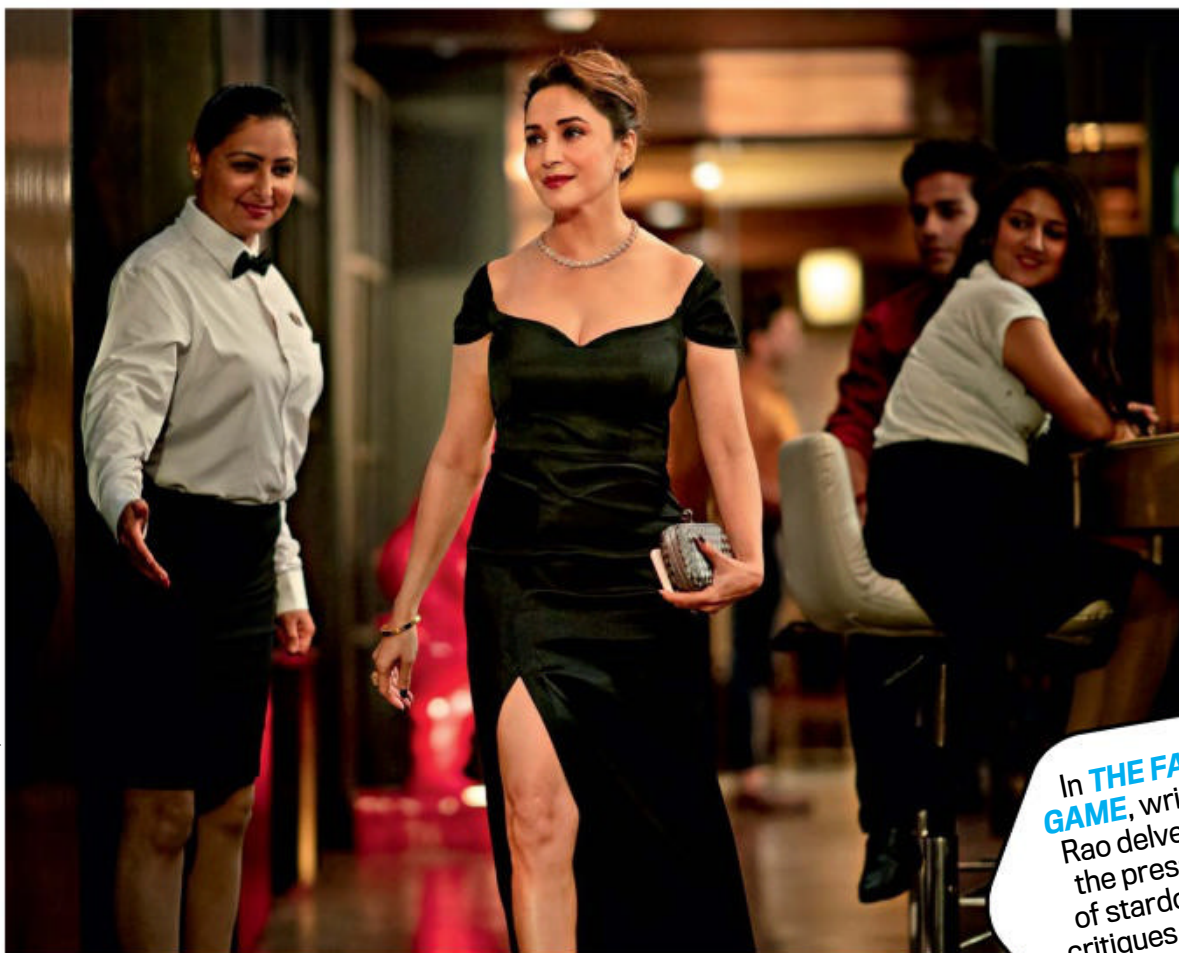


SHOWGIRLS OF PAKISTAN (2020)

Pakistan

The toast of IDFA 2020, Saad Khan's documentary puts Pakistan's *mujra* culture under the microscope. The film examines how three dancers pursue their vocation while battling death threats.





SCREEN PRESENCE

Madhuri Dixit-Nene in
The Fame Game

something her two teenage sons like her to be. “I understood where she (Anamika) comes from, what she feels, her insecurities, what she pines for, and what she is missing out in life,” says Madhuri.

“I have sometimes gone through what she has.” Watching the first four episodes of the eight-part series, there’s a lot that Anamika has to contend with. The woman of the house, she has an insecure

producer-husband, two kids with teenage issues, an overbearing mother, an obsessive fan, a co-star who isn’t over her and a career that the world thinks is on its last legs.

Rao uses the premise of an actress who goes missing to look at the pressures of stardom and subtly critique the film industry, which is perhaps eager to write actresses off much sooner than actors. Today, Madhuri isn’t headlining big-budget films like some of her male co-stars from the 1990s still do, but, at 54, she continues to be busy—be it judging dance shows or playing the lead part in a Netflix series. Is there a formula for a long career, we ask. “You have to work really hard, be sincere, make sure you do everything to the best of your abilities and try to think out of the box even if people advise you not to,” says Madhuri. ■

—Suhani Singh

In **THE FAME GAME**, writer Sri Rao delves into the pressures of stardom and critiques how the film industry deals with actresses

LEISURE

OTT

THE FLIP SIDE OF FAME

Madhuri Dixit-Nene’s character in an upcoming Netflix series explores the fraught life of a superstar actress

I have nothing left to prove,” says Madhuri Dixit-Nene. No, she isn’t hanging up her boots; she’s simply reminding one of what she has achieved in the nearly three decades spent in front of the camera. A film which ran in cinemas for over 100 weeks (*Hum Aapke Hai Koun..!*); multiple dances that have inspired generations of women, and even men; and films where she superseded her male co-stars. So when Netflix approached US-based writer Sri Rao to develop a series about the fraught life of a superstar heroine, she was the only actress he had in mind. “One of my primary objectives was to create a vehicle for Madhuri in the way that Julia Roberts, Nicole Kidman, Reese Witherspoon have got on TV in the US,” says Rao. “She is the greatest living actress in India today and deserves a story and role of that calibre.”

Playing a superstar, Anamika Anand, in *The Fame Game* came easy to Madhuri. It also gave her the opportunity to “be with the times”,

The Long View

NEW WEB SHOWS TO STREAM



UNDEKHI: SEASON 2 (SonyLIV)

The first season of this gripping crime thriller ended on a kind of cliffhanger that left you biting nails at the edge of your seat. Streaming from March 4, the show returns with its stellar cast—Harsh Chhaya, Surya Sharma, Dibyendu Bhattacharya—and even darker twists and turns.

• • • • •



JUGAADISTAN (Lionsgate Play)

Releasing on March 4, this campus drama seems to have all the right ingredients—politics, love, rivalries, and an incredible cast that includes Sumeet Vyas, Arjun Mathur and Parambrata Chatterjee.

• • • • •

MITHYA (Zee5)

When a Hindi literature university professor (Huma Qureshi) accuses a student (Avantika Dassani) of plagiarism, she sparks a psychological battle that leads to hostilities, revelations and even a murder.

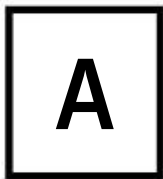


ONKAR JADHAV

CINEMA

Role Reversal

BOBBY DEOL, THE BRAWNY HERO OF THE NINETIES, IS PLAYING THE BAD GUY THESE DAYS—AND LOVING IT



After 25 years in Indian cinema, Bobby Deol had little idea that he could be good at being a bad guy. The opportunity to showcase his mean streak came with the Prakash Jha-helmed web series *Aashram* in which Deol

bad days in the film industry taught me a lot. The maturity you gain makes you understand different personalities. Every individual has the good and bad in them. While playing negative roles, you just let the bad in you out."

Streaming platforms have given the careers of many actors from the '90s a new lease of life. Deol saw

an Abbas-Mustan-directed Netflix feature. He also begins shooting for crime drama *Animal* alongside Ranbir Kapoor and Anil Kapoor. "It is my very deliberate attempt to not just play the main character," Deol says. "The characters I want to play now may not have screen time, but they make an impact."

Deol is aware of



SHADES OF DARK
Deol as an assassin in *Love Hostel*

"You get few [good] choices and there is such amazing talent around. You have to play every character to the tee"
—BOBBY DEOL

plays a menacing god-man running a cult. Deol, 53, continues to explore the darker shades in the gritty thriller *Love Hostel*, which recently released on ZEE5. He plays an assassin hunting for a runaway interfaith couple (Sanya Malhotra and Vikrant Massey) in the Shanker Raman-directed feature.

"I never got a chance to do such roles," says Deol of his character, Dagar. "Seeing the good and

his fortunes turn with *Class of '83* (Netflix), released in 2020. "The character (chief recruit at a police academy) was subdued and frustrated, and helped people notice my acting. People have started thinking of me in newer roles," says Deol, best known for playing the brawny hero in the mid-1990s.

After *Love Hostel*, Deol returns for the much-anticipated season two of *Aashram*, followed by *Penthouse*,

the way cinema and audience tastes have evolved since his debut in 1995. "You cannot take things for granted anymore," says Deol. "You get few [good] choices and there is such amazing talent around. You have to play every character to the tee." But Deol likes the challenge. "I am enjoying this phase of my life."

—Suhani Singh

HUNGRY FOR MORE

Bad health might have kept him from our screens for a bit, but the 71-year-old **Mithun Chakraborty** is now doing it all—making a digital debut, readying a new film, even judging a reality TV show

Q. What got you interested in Amazon Prime's *Bestsellers*?

I play a police officer but not a regular one. His character is quite interesting because he is very unpredictable. While he is really good at his job, he doesn't seem to take it seriously. He is also a foodie, who is constantly talking about food and even has his own food channel. He is so obsessed with food that in the middle of an investigation, he starts talking about some dish or where to get the best sweets in the city from. At the same time, he is absolutely ruthless.

Q. You love cooking in real life too, right?

Yeah. Cooking has been a lifelong hobby. I think I make really good Indian food. The only other cuisine I cook is Chinese but I am not very good at it.

Q. You've done almost 370 films. Do you still get nervous when you start a new acting project?

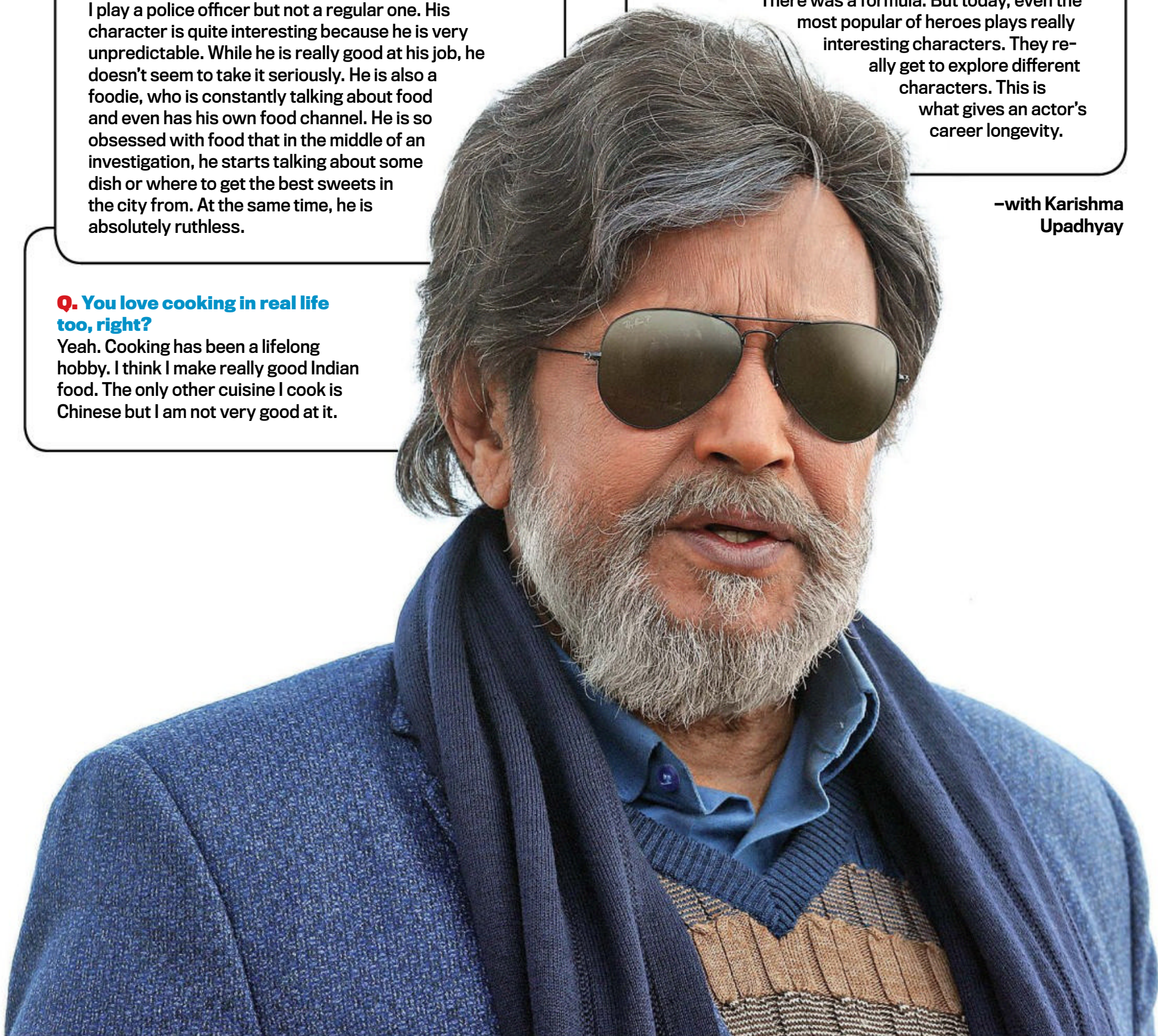
I don't get nervous, but I am definitely aware that it is a new cast and crew I will be working with. It does take a day or two for everyone to settle in. I am a very easy actor to have on set and I like having a friendly vibe around me. I crack jokes and get friendly with everyone so that they stop thinking of me as a senior actor or being in awe of me, because that will show up on screen.

Q. The industry has transformed in many ways since you made your debut 46 years ago. Is there a change that you wish had happened during your heydays?

During the '80s and '90s, casting me or any hero in a film meant it had to have five great songs, five action sequences and some heavy-duty dialogues.

There was a formula. But today, even the most popular of heroes plays really interesting characters. They really get to explore different characters. This is what gives an actor's career longevity.

—with Karishma Upadhyay



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THE GOOD LIFE

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IF MUSIC BE THE FOOD OF LOVE

Global boyband BTS, on their self journeys, music and passions

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ACCORDING TO A PIECE OF POP PSYCHOLOGY POPULARLY

ascribed to John Lennon, "there are two basic motive forces: fear and love." It sounds like a reasonable point—if the experience of the past two years is anything to go by. While the pandemic provoked choices and cemented behaviours by the force of fear, it is through sheer dint of universal love that the record-smashing, globally successful seven-member South Korean juggernaut of a pop group, BTS, has reached the top of the U.S. charts, won millions of fans around the world, crushed online viewing records and propelled their music label to a \$7.5 billion IPO valuation.

Cover stars of our current issue, BTS, or Bangtan Sonyeondan, (which roughly translates to 'Bulletproof Boy Scouts'), are now the unofficial brand ambassadors of the 'Korean Wave' and emblematic of the outsize cultural impact of their nation across the globe. How did these seven young superstars rewrite the rules of the music business to become the biggest band in the world? They are the most-streamed group of all time on Spotify with an incredible 16.3 billion plays.

Beyond their unique, genre-defying music, messages of positivity and hope, releasing multiple albums, breaking every kind of record, it's the circumstances of their success that is most remarkable. Appearing in impromptu livestreams throughout the pandemic, they ascended to the pinnacle of their stardom in the two years in which the whole world seemed to have hit pause.

While everyone struggled to maintain connections the world over, BTS's bonds to their international fan base, a.k.a. the BTS ARMY, stood out in their activism, putting BTS' positive messages into action. Their environmental projects, like saving rainforests and whales, and their fundraising for vulnerable groups such as refugees and LGBTQ people have catapulted them into a global cultural movement that goes beyond the fandom.

If it's the raw, free-spirited feel of BTS's early work that first garnered global attention, it is the 20 odd gins, craft beers, rums, exclusive single malts, heritage-tagged Feni, exotic cocktails and susegad that has helped Goa make its mark as an alco-bev destination. *Spice* rounds up the smashing standouts, curious mix of botanicals and quirky labels that line the library shelves of special Christmas Editions, and the Select Cask range of whiskies.

Spice's indulgent grub crawl leads us to gleaming Dubai. Already well established in the culinary landscape the global metropolis has only upped its game. From the 14-course menu at Trésind Studio to Ninive, the city's trendiest Middle Eastern restaurant to Vanitas at Palazzo Versace, our list summons the most palate-teasing experiences.

Dubai's chrome and glass architecture may not be winning laurels in the design world anymore, but mixed metals seem to be the trend du jour for jewellery in 2022. Warmer golds and industrial metallic are the new favourites as customers flirt with different tones, statement jewellery styles and colours. Traditional Indian 'baaju bandhs' appear to be holding international runways in thrall with strings of leather, interesting fringes and even tech pouches found fastened around arms at brands such as Rodarte, Ludovic de Saint Sernin, and Tory Burch.

Though bright and upbeat, current trends in jewellery carry the baggage of past months but with an optimistic, aspirational perspective. Much like the all-muscle inspiration of the new Lamborghini Huracán STO. Drive it in Trofeo Mode to experience the car in its wildest avatar. While it may seem untameable as it surges from 0-200kmph in just 9 seconds, with a price tag of a mere ₹5 crore, it's certainly not untenable. As Lennon famously sang, "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one..."

(Aroon Purie)

INDIA
TODAY

BREAKING NEWS

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1. DR MERIN LIZA JACOB

A medical practitioner with a passion for clean and transparent beauty, Dr Liza Merin Jacob is the Co-Founder of Green And Beige, a skin, body, and hair care brand focussed on sustainability, honesty, and transparency. At Green And Beige, she has balanced her knowledge of ingredients, their medicinal properties and her extensive initial work in the skincare and haircare segment to create products that benefit humans and the planet.



2. RUPALI DEAN

Awarded the 'Best food writer in the country' by the Indian culinary forum, WACS and the ministry of Tourism, Rupali Dean is a trained hospitality professional, from the Institute of Hotel Management, a nutritionist and a former chef. She has also pursued food photography and a writing course from the Champagne region in France.



3. KAABIA GREWAL & SASHA GREWAL

A passion for jewellery and desire for the unorthodox were the driving forces that brought sisters and visionaries, Kaabia and Sasha to launch Outhouse in 2012. Guided by their sophisticated yet dramatic sensibility, the design duo combines unique elements with inventive designs to create their bridge collections. One of the leading bridge jewellery houses in the country today, Outhouse counts celebrities such as Beyonce, Kim Kardashian, Cardi B, Vanessa Hudgens, Nicki Minaj, Sonam Kapoor, Deepika Padukone and Ranveer Singh among some of their clients.



4. SULABH PURI

Sulabh Puri is the Editor in Chief of GadgetBridge.com & MotorBridge.com. A content specialist, he started his career young and it has been a rewarding 18 years. Before heading Gadget Bridge, he was the Editor of Times of India (TOI) Technology and GadgetsNow.com. He has also led TOI's international arm as the Editorial Head of Business Insider India and Tech Radar India. He loves everything 'gadgety' and enjoys tinkering with new tech toys. When he is not working, he can be found in the kitchen, baking chocolate cakes and croissants and cooking Korean ramen.



5. GAGAN SHARMA

A certified sommelier and mixologist by qualification, Sharma holds the prestigious WSET Diploma. With over decade and a half of work experience in India and abroad, he is currently the creator and curator at Indulge India, offering experiential and edu-taining beverage journeys to discerning aesthetes. In his free time, romanticises Urdu, and loves to read about Mughal history. He's also a certified mountaineer and holds the Limca Book of records for his travels.



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— COVER STORY —

MAKING THE WORLD DANCE TO THEIR TUNES

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE BIGGEST MUSIC BAND IN THE WORLD: BTS

On the cover BTS; Photographer KANG HYEON WON Editor GQ KOREA PARK NA NA & VOGUE KOREA SOHN EUN YOUNG; Stylist LEE HA JUNG; Hair BAEK HEUNG KWON, CHOI MU JIN, HAN SOM, JANG HAE IN, PARK NAE JOO; Make Up CHOI SI NO, KIM DA REUM, KIM JI HYUN; All clothing LOUIS VUITTON

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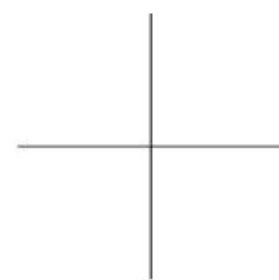
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Five superlative culinary experiences in Dubai



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HOTSHEET

COLLECTOR'S EDITION



WATCH ME ROAR

Over and above its importance in religious iconography, the tiger embodies a host of fine qualities too, majesty, strength, grace and of course, sheer good looks. Feline charm aside, on the occasion of the Chinese New Year, Breguet is adding its own touch to the Year of the Tiger celebrations with an eight-piece limited edition. The dial of this watch from the Classique collection showcases the in-house guilloché and engraving expertise. The result: A timepiece adorned with a Tiger whose beauty is rivalled only by its strength.

The Tiger is considered a sacred animal in China, and has been since antiquity. Its ferocity is feared as much as it is admired. All these are inspiring qualities for Breguet, which the brand hopes to interpret with the feline's confident gait and gaze. Using a play on perspectives, a week's work is required to craft each dial. The result is a design in relief on which the great cat is depicted as approaching.

The watch face also features the distinctive characteristics of the House, such as the engraved logo between 7 and 8 o'clock and the blued steel open-tipped Breguet hands that accompany the hours and minutes. The chapter ring is punctuated by discreet round gold hour-markers and the 40 mm case is crafted in 18-carat rose gold. Now that qualifies it as King of the Jungle or the horology world in this case.

—By Chumki Bharadwaj

HOTSHEET

~~~~~ PICK OF THE MONTH ~~~~~



## Look No further

Those peepers will never sport so much sparkle as with these gold and diamond-studded sunglasses from Izzari by Aanchal Jain. Embellished with enamel in 14 carat gold, it's the kind of signature look that screams attention.

**Price** on request;

**Availability** Izzari by Aanchal Jain



## Scents of Desire

For Keeps, a scented candle from A La Folie luxurious celebrates commitment with a sensual interplay of complex fragrances, playing on seductive and indulgent notes—Bergamot, Orchid, Jasmine, Tuberose, Patchouli and Musk.

What more do you need to light your fire?

**Price** ₹5,890; **Availability** <https://alafoliefrances.com/>



## Watch Out

Louis Vuitton's Tambour Horizon Light Up is the French Maison's third generation connected watch. Seamlessly bringing the worlds of art and technology together, it is the most customisable connected watch in the world with 24 LED lights behind the signature Louis Vuitton Monogram ring. Whenever the watch is activated or receives a notification, these light up in a dancing kaleidoscope of colours.

**Price** on request; **Availability** Brand stores

## Envy me green

Inspired by delicate butterflies and cheerful colours from the AMARIS garden by Perna Rajpal, the Summer Muse Earrings are one half adorned in marquise-shaped Zambian Emeralds and the other in gleaming diamonds.

Duality never appeared so alluring.

**Price** on request; **Availability** <https://www.amarisjewels.com>





# HOTSHEET

GIFTING



## Caffeine Fix

This is the perfect way to curry favour and gain brownie points with your coffee mate. Rekindle your relationship with great coffee with the Premium Instant Kit by Sleepy Owl. Add the wow in your morning with a frother, premium Instant Coffee Original (100g) powder and a ceramic mug.

**Price** ₹1,699; **Availability**

## Colour Play

Let your eyes do the talking with the ETUDE Play Color Eye Palette—Rose Bomb. Versatility is the calling card with a 15-colour eye shadow palette. Featuring various shades of rose petals ranging from bright pink, subtle lilac to dusky brown, it holds choices with different textures as well, such as matte, satin, and glitter. Look no further.

**Price** ₹1,950; **Availability** [www.nykaa.com](http://www.nykaa.com); [www.maccaron.in](http://www.maccaron.in)



## Get Sparkly

If you weren't born with it, you can definitely acquire it: Glowing skin at least. The Kashmiri saffron-turmeric brightening hydrator from Lilaa Organic Skincare—a plant-based line of clean beauty formulations—promises to bid adieu to dry skin woes. The moisturiser promises to rejuvenate skin, fade blemishes and hydrate it, leaving a luminous glow.

**Price** ₹4,500 (50g); **Availability** [Lilaaorganicskincare.com](http://Lilaaorganicskincare.com)



## Flush of Romance

For most discerning palates, tea has transitioned from routine to ritual. The romance of brewing that perfect cuppa defines the outline of the day. Sample Cupid's Choice Special Darjeeling tea collection from Golden Tips Tea to stir magic in your cup. The collection of Exotic 3- Season Teas is the perfect pick-me-up.

**Price** ₹1,295 (300 gm); **Availability**



# FETISH

## A GLORIOUS COMEBACK



Legacy is the grand cache of any brand, especially a watch marque. So the Bathyscaphe Titanium, the new kid on the block, from the Fifty Fathoms collection carries the weight of the Bathyscaphe line since its inception in 1956. A mainstay of Blancpain's diver's watch collection, this latest addition to the Bathyscaphe line features a titanium case. Titanium is a reliable ally of diver's watches, offering numerous advantages including high resistance to shock, pressure and corrosion. What's more, this metal boasts a low density making it light and comfortable to wear. This high-end titanium is rarely used in the watch industry and requires challenging machining work. Technical and precision timekeeping feats are par for the course for this new Bathyscaphe equipped with in-house Calibre 1315, a benchmark in the field of sports watches. This new model comes fitted with a NATO or anthracite sailcloth strap, or a grade 23 satin-finished titanium bracelet. The design of the latter is identical to those fitted on Fifty Fathoms models—a first for a Bathyscaphe timepiece.

**Price** on request;  
**Availability** Brand Stores



# COVER STORY

MUSIC | PROFILE | INTERVIEW



## THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

DESPITE NUMEROUS CHALLENGES, THE BOY BAND BTS HAS REWRITTEN THE HISTORY OF K-POP. IT IS THE MOST-STREAMED GROUP OF ALL TIME ON SPOTIFY WITH AN INCREDIBLE 16.3 BILLION PLAYS, APART FROM BEING THE FIRST ASIAN GROUP TO BE NAMED ARTIST OF THE YEAR AT THE AMERICAN MUSIC AWARDS. HERE'S WHAT GOES BEHIND MAKING THE WORLD DANCE TO THEIR TUNES.



## RM, whose tireless journey of self-discovery demands our attention.

Conversations with RM often centre on the topic of eternity. RM, who has begun performing concerts again after a two-year hiatus, is trying to recapture his edge. The Covid-19 pandemic has been tough for many creative types, but for BTS, it led to the birth of their English songs—“Dynamite,” “Butter” and “Permission to Dance”—which were written in an attempt to get closer to ARMY members around the world. In the meantime, RM celebrated the 2021 BTS FESTA event by releasing a new solo song, “*Bicycle*,” a song heralding a new direction for him. RM says that he too has changed. “I got used to being on-trend as I’ve been living in a milieu where being fashionable is important, but I don’t think I should keep on living like this. I don’t quite know how to do it, but I’ve started wanting to produce something long-lasting and timeless. I’m beginning to think about it a lot at this point—it’s been nearly nine years since I became a member of BTS.” BTS, a boy band whose songs are drawn from real life, has profoundly impacted our lives.

The connections we make with artists can be deep and powerful when their lyrics validate our inner emotions, such as pain and pleasure. RM’s lyrics, which are sharply perceptive, cerebral and beautifully expressed, help brighten our view of the world. When I ask about the current direction of his lyrics, he answers in broad terms. “In the past,” he says, “I was bound by rules a great deal... and I was preoccupied with showing off certain techniques, etc. These days, however, I focus instead on creating a certain texture that I want to convey in a more abstract way. I’ve developed the ability to think in multisensory dimensions, incorporating visual as well as tactile elements. I take a holistic approach with the lyrics, melodies, beats and voices—all the elements of music.” BTS, who have spoken at the United Nations and performed at the UN General Assembly, are our pride and joy, but artists often have duties and responsibilities beyond their music. When asked if he ever feels that these changes are musically limiting or if they provide inspiration and new opportunities, RM replies, “Both.” “One rarely equals just one,” he continues. “It can be two or even four. Representing one’s country can feel wonderful and can also be a burden. What’s certain is that it’s not something we seek out, and it’s unlikely to go away because we want it to. I think it’s my destiny to accept it as a calling and do what I’m good at. In other words, my life may come with responsibilities. But this kind of life can be fun, and I intend to keep on living with this attitude.” “I became conscious of my Korean identity after we began working in the United States. I got into music through hip-hop and pop, and at that time

I also loved Korean hip-hop. Different DNAs are intricately intertwined, but anyway, the cultural climate I was born into and grew up with while listening to Korean music seems to be ingrained in me. Those early influences are still with me, and that’s natural.” BTS are well aware of the power of celebrity and have learned to use it in a positive way. There are several keywords that describe BTS, and they all apply to RM’s development as well. RM has been searching for his identity, a process that naturally led to the creation of music. He considers BTS to be a sort of miracle and believes their sincerity and dreams will prevail, touching the utopia deep within many of us and helping to make the world a better place, despite everything. “They say we need to concentrate on the present rather than pursuing our dreams,” he says. Dreams keep on making our hearts sing even when they are accused of being banal. RM’s dream is human after all. “I want to be recognised as someone other than a member of BTS, and I want to create other types of art,” he says. BTS started as “the boys who fight against prejudice and the oppression of teens.” And they have gained the nickname Beyond the Scene, meaning “youths who refuse to settle for the status quo and continue striving to achieve their dreams.” Not since the Beatles has there been an artist who “hoped that every word, every line of my lyrics, would help people live.”

By SOHYUN CHO



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 PHOTOGRAPHER: LESS; STYLIST: Lee Ha Jung; HAIR: Han Som Bit & Boot  
 MAKEUP: Kim Ji Hyun





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## Jin

### The irony of Jin—lighthearted yet serious and insightful.

A typical day off for Jin goes something like this: He falls asleep after playing computer games until 5 a.m. and finally wakes up at 2 p.m. Then he stays in bed and stares blankly at the ceiling for about three hours, occasionally checking his phone or turning on the TV and flipping through the channels. Eventually, he sits in front of the computer again, and he eats something when hunger strikes. After eating, he feels drowsy and heads back to bed. To borrow Jin's expression, this is a day that is "excessively lazy, and that some might say is a bit pathetic." Ironically, Jin can commit himself more to his regular work routine because he appreciates the value of "lazy time." "You know the saying: 'I bend my knees only to jump higher'" he says with a laugh. Much is lost from Jin's words when they are recorded and transcribed. Imagine hearing his childlike enthusiasm—it's like he's telling the most interesting story in the world, regardless of the topic. His voice has a playful yet confident tone, and he punctuates his remarks with distinctive squeaks of laughter (once described as "the sound glass makes when being cleaned"). He has a unique sense of humour, and everything is out in the open. His

## SUGA

### 'Minstradamus' SUGA, whimsical and refreshing.

"The Portland Trail Blazers. I prefer the underdogs to the big teams," says SUGA when asked about his current interests. This is so like him. During our lively conversation, he reveals, for the first time, both his favorite team and his favorite player (Damian Lillard). "It's the NBA season. This is what I live for these days," he says with a laugh. SUGA's face has never looked brighter. He looks relaxed and composed, exuding a sense of calm confidence, which has replaced a dark cloud of tension. I am reminded of the prevailing sense of resignation and transcendence in *D-2*, a mixtape he released in May 2020.

"Resignation," he echoes. "That's right, I feel I've let it all go. Covid-19 is not something I can change through willpower. Now, I have a better idea of how much energy it takes to swim against the tide."

The last few years have been intense for him. "It's not that I don't try hard or that I work less hard. I think I've learned to come to terms with it more than when I was younger," he reflects. Indeed, he has clearly gone through a change. The rapper Agust D, with his highly contagious pessimism and melancholy, is nowhere to be found. "Finally, I was able to look

at myself. I'd been making a weapon out of anger and a sense of inferiority, but around 2018, my self-destructive rage slowly started to subside. I realised that I couldn't channel creative energy through only those sorts of emotions any longer."

"*People*" is an insightful masterpiece that reveals how Yoon-gi Min (SUGA's birth name) has developed as an individual. It reflects the most mature version of SUGA since his BTS debut. SUGA says, "Because it's a record of four years of my life. I set aside most songs after they're done, but I find myself re-listening to '*People*' all the time, and I experience different emotions each time I hear it. It's a song I put on mostly when I'm feeling lonely and sentimental."

If the main appeal of BTS is raw honesty, there is no doubt that SUGA contributes the lion's share. It is the fate of the artist to have to use grief and gloom as grist for creativity, and that can't always be easy, I tell him. SUGA's response is whimsical and refreshing: "People seem to like my music." The confidence in his small smile and his forthrightness, which is free of arrogance, is endearing. When I get a request for a new song and they specify the theme and message, I can quickly draw the outline of a three-minute song. I can figure out the gist of it in a short time, and I build it from there. So, it's like a sketch. I usually finish my sketches very quickly."

For artists, inspiration often comes from interaction. Take, for example, the Coldplay collaboration, which was surely BTS' most important experience of late. The collab ended up



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jokes are delivered nonchalantly, cheerfully and sincerely, certainly not as a defense mechanism or to cover up insecurity, as with people who joke endlessly to hide what they really feel. When I quietly ask him why he can't stand a serious atmosphere, Jin answers straightforwardly, remarking, "Because it's no fun" and "I'm always like this, whether being interviewed or just talking with friends." Jin's philosophy of fun is one of BTS' unique points. BTS are much more down-to-earth and familiar than many other superstars. Seeing the messages they send and the way they goof around during TV appearances and interviews, we get the same impression of them as we did when they debuted eight years ago. (And their enormous success since then only makes this more charming.) Indeed, Jin's ability to smooth over any situation in a carefree manner is at the heart of BTS' charm. And yet Jin insists, "No, I'm not very good at anything, and I don't excel at anything. Those around me don't agree, but... Whenever I say this, they're either appalled, or they try to convince me that I've accomplished amazing things. But I still have a hard time accepting that. If someone asked me what my talents were, I wouldn't have

much to say except, 'I'm a member of BTS.'"

"In the past," he says, "I used to separate Jin, the BTS member, from the human being Seokjin Kim (Jin's birth name), to some extent. But now I don't. How I come across on TV is how I live my life." It is not easy to live your life the way you want to without giving in to outside pressure—especially if you are one of the most famous people in the world, receiving attention from fans across the planet and having to meet their expectations.

Now, Jin is steadily working toward the goal he set in 2020—"living without thinking." Jin explains, "because you're filled with trivial thoughts, like 'I have to do this tomorrow, I have to do that the day after tomorrow' ... I've always disliked planning. If you make a plan, you have to stick to it, but I find this difficult, so I tend to be spontaneous, whether going on a trip or whatever. You need to have a framework in your life, but I try to avoid making detailed plans. My head hurts," he says with a laugh. Joking until the very end, Jin concludes, "I think I'm a little happier these days because I'm living without thinking."

By MINJI KWON

being much more organic and congenial than most people had expected. "I was amazed when they offered to come to Korea," SUGA recounts. "They said that when Coldplay does a collaboration, Chris Martin always comes in person to record. I was surprised that he was so keen." "I realised that our experience and what Coldplay has been through for nearly 25 years were not so very different. The conversation took off as we compared our struggles." A flicker of emotion crosses SUGA's face as he describes the moment he realised that the struggles of a rock band and a boy band are the same.

I ask SUGA if he got any insights or tips from the veterans. With a laugh, he says, "We did a lot of melody dubbing while recording the rap sections, and their reactions were fantastic. You could feel it in the recording booth. When having a vocal directing session, I tend to be fairly straight-faced, without showing my reactions, as if I were missing half my soul. But it made me think that taking Coldplay's approach might be a better way to bring out an artist's potential."

What has SUGA, who seems to have done it all, gained



and lost in the past eight years? "I think I'm happier now," he confides. "I've realised that happiness doesn't require much, and it can be quite simple. I used to think material things would give me happiness, and I worked hard to achieve them. But when I succeeded, I wasn't so sure anymore. I don't have many earthly desires anyway," he says with a laugh. So now, I try to find happiness in simple things, such as getting up early in the morning and having decaf coffee. I'm glad I've finally got to experience this kind of joy. What I lost would be being ordinary. Your ordinary is my extraordinary, right? But I think time will solve this issue."

SUGA adds that this is the longest he has been in Korea since his debut, and that he is enjoying the perks of a daily routine rather than the excitement of globe-trotting. When the time comes to say goodbye to Yoongi Min, I ask something I have been holding back. "A Grammy?" he replies. "I have both a humble and a confident reply. Which one would you like? I honestly don't expect we'll win, but I think we will!" Yes, "Minstradamus" has never been wrong.

By YOUNGDAE KIM

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HAIR: Baek Heung Kwon salon HEARTS; MAKEUP: Choi Si No SEOULBASE

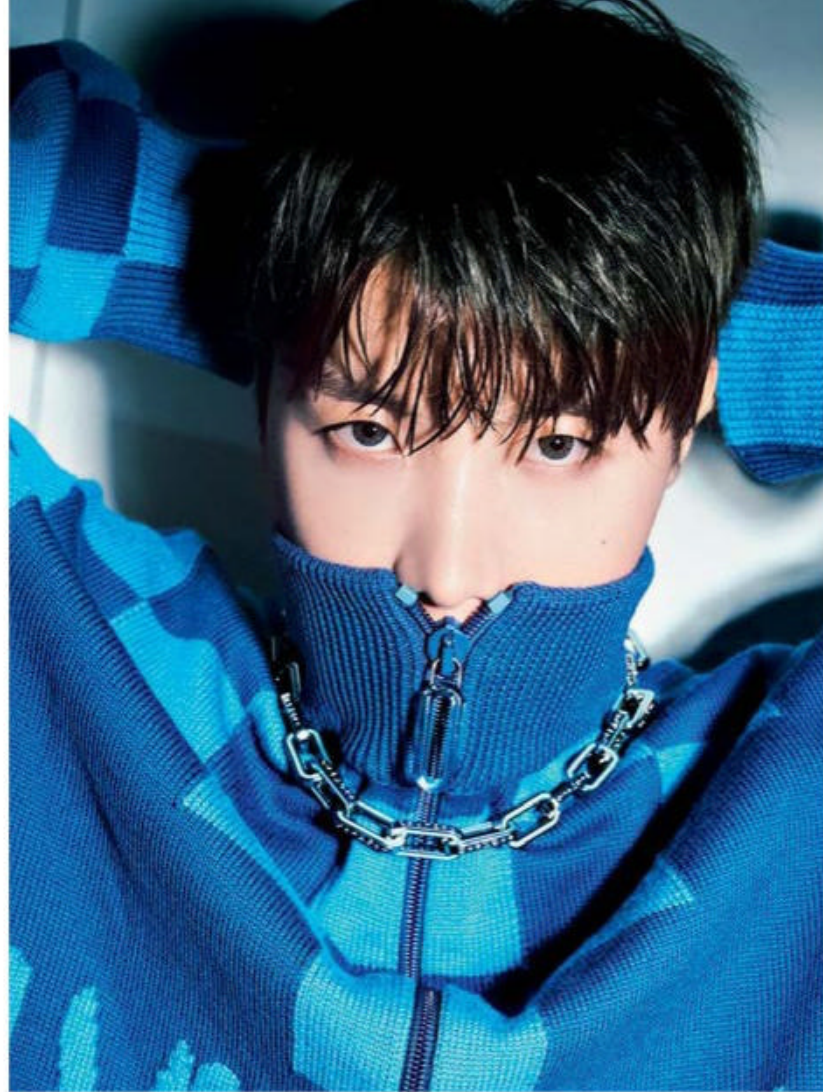


# j-hope

## j-hope, the story of the youth called 'hope'.

While it is a special time for everyone, Christmas Eve is particularly poignant for j-hope. When he travelled from Gwangju to Seoul on December 24, 2010, to become a K-pop trainee, the worst cold spell in 30 years had just hit the country. What dreams was he having as he slept in the dark dormitory, a 16-year-old boy in a new environment? After a long, cold winter, the era of BTS began to unfold. Excitement still hangs in the air from the recent online concert BTS Permission to Dance on Stage, held at Seoul Olympic Stadium, Korea. j-hope is on top of the world. In the midst of a dazzling, seemingly endless summer of success, he sings of hope. Aptly, Hope World happens to be the title of his first solo mixtape, released back in 2018. "It was my debut mixtape, and I thought of it as a business card of some sort," j-hope shares. He became the first Korean solo artist to chart on the Billboard 200 (Billboard's main album chart) for two weeks in a row. Meanwhile, in 2019, his song "*Chicken Noodle Soup*" debuted on the Billboard Hot 100, bringing him further global popularity. The music video for the track, featuring Becky G, has garnered over 316 million views. As well, he was one of the songwriters/composers of "My Universe," a collaboration between BTS and Coldplay. And he holds the joint distinction, along with RM and SUGA, of being the first Korean musician with songwriting credits for three songs that topped the Billboard Hot 100 chart. BTS, the first Asian group to be named Artist of the Year at the American Music Awards, performed with Coldplay at the 2021 awards show. Coldplay's Chris Martin expressed his excitement about collaborating with BTS by saying, "It's like a dream coming true." The singer of the famed British rock band also said j-hope's "*Chicken Noodle Soup*" was his favourite song. In the music video for the song, j-hope performs with dancers from over 50 countries while wearing a necklace with his childhood photo on it and wearing rings sporting Korea's national flag on both hands. A top underground dancer, j-hope began dreaming of becoming a singer in sixth grade and became famous for his dancing on Geumnam-ro and Chungjang-ro streets, in Gwangju. Though lots has happened, his passion for dancing remains intact.

During spare moments during BTS' world travels, j-hope works on songwriting. His candid, sincere songs bring fans joy and comfort. Now that he has achieved all his aims and dreams, what more does he want? "As I always say, I learn a lot working on albums," he admits. "I think I came to like myself a little more and was able to grow as a person while working on the Love Yourself album. These days, I muse about what happiness means. Sometimes, I receive less comfort from hu-



EDITOR: GQ Korea, Kim Yu Jin & VOGUE Korea, Shin Eun Ji; PHOTOGRAPHER: Yoon Ji Yong  
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man beings than from animals like dogs—small creatures that I can't even talk to. Small interactions like that give me lots of happiness." He says that when there is a pause in his schedule, he spends most of his time at home. For someone who is one of the busiest people in the world, these are precious chances to rest. "Actually, I don't do anything special when I'm alone at home," he says. "When I take a break, I tend to veg out and watch TV because I do too much when I'm working. I have a regular routine, but now and then I sleep till noon." Of course, music is always on his mind; creating music has become such a large part of his life that he even works on music while taking a break. The first in-person BTS concert in two years is coming up soon, and j-hope concedes, "I'm nervous and excited." Tickets sold out for all four performances of BTS Permission to Dance On Stage-LA, a milestone for SoFi Stadium, near Los Angeles. BTS were also part of the Jingle Ball Tour, the largest year-end music festival in the United States. The boy who left his hometown to become a singer 11 years ago is expecting to spend Christmas Eve as a nominee for the Grammy Awards. "When I go on stage and face my fans, I'm so glad to have become part of BTS. It makes me realise that I am where I am now because of those people who watch me dance and sing and who give me love," he says earnestly. "That's the moment when I can truly enjoy being myself, j-hope and Hoseok Jung (j-hope's birth name)." The time allotted for our interview has run out, but j-hope's story will continue. j-hope's bright, towering world of hope, which will be created with the people he loves—it is all a sweet reverie that I don't want to awake from.

By MEEHYE LEE



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## Jimin

**The things that gladden Jimin, who is unforgettable once seen and heard.**

Pop artists typically say that they want to be “unique” rather than be the best. But Jimin truly is one of a kind—it is impossible to forget him after seeing him and hearing him sing. The dancing of K-pop boy groups is usually a fusion of hip-hop and street dance. Jimin, however, adds the flexibility inherent in modern dance. Jimin’s incredible vocal range, which is rare even among female vocalists, is a weapon that enriches BTS’ songs. In addition, Jimin’s bold emotional expression, no matter what type of song he is singing, has played a big part in the evolution of BTS, whose songs originally centered on powerful hip-hop. Over time, BTS have expanded the focus of their lyrics, going from commenting on social issues to considering youth, love, existence itself and the hopefulness and harmony that can be arrived at through a positive daily outlook. The longevity of a pop idol like Jimin depends on how much passion he stirs up among the public, and lyricism is what transforms that affection into enthusiasm and adoration. Jimin’s somewhat dreamy facial expressions and manner of speaking, even when laughing and joking, evoke a sense of longing in the hearts of fans, and Jimin himself may not even be fully aware of this. Some people are born with inexplicable qualities: Some deserve to be stars, some need a stage and some fascinating characters arouse both compassion and envy. Over the past two years, BTS has put together an amazing track record. The success of a string of recent singles culminated in BTS being named Artist of the Year at the American Music Awards. Ironically, though, Jimin felt he was creatively stagnant during this time. The pandemic hit when the stars were at their peak, and the long wait for restrictions to be lifted was painful for both BTS and ARMY. “The past two years have turned out to be almost endless. I’m still young, but for most of my life all I’ve done is perform on stage,” Jimin reflects. Such agonising is also related to the question, “What’s next?” (a question that BTS is constantly being bombarded with). Certain fans who love the raw, free-spirited feel of their early work worry that the global attention and the resulting pressure may limit the scope of their message. “Should we find something new, or should we refine what we’ve done?” Jimin ponders. He has also thought long and hard about his singing. His style of singing has gone through many changes, from the soft ballad style of “*Serendipity*” to the dreamy falsetto of “*Filter*” to the clean high notes of recent pop tunes. For a singer, changing one’s

singing style is like erasing one’s fingerprints. Though he has already gone through this difficult process several times, he is still hungry for change.

There have been many attempts to pin down the secret to BTS’ success. However, even if their formula were figured out, it would be difficult to emulate. There is something more than intimacy between BTS members. They share a common trust because they share the same goals. “Whether we’re dancing, singing or performing, we all influence one another,” explains Jimin. “It’s like, ‘Oh, he’s good. I’ll try that, too.’ When there are difficulties, I ask myself, ‘What is this team for? What did we start this team for?’ and it helps me refocus. We had a hard time at first—we argued. We weren’t used to the work. But now I feel fortunate to be part of the group.” While on the road to superstardom, he once mused, “What is it I really want to do apart from achieving perfection as a singer?” Recently, though, he seems to have learned to let things go. “I didn’t have any hobbies back then, and I was distressed whenever I left the stage,” he admits. “That was probably why. But now I don’t ask that question anymore. Instead, I work out every day and meet friends, and I’m content with that. I started running, and at first I felt like I was dying after 2.5km. But now I can run as far as 8km. The reason I got into running was that the sound of the breeze silenced my inner voice. I used to hate being alone because there were too many thoughts going around in my head, and it scared me, but now I feel I need time alone. Running helps clear my mind.” On

January 31, 2022 (local time), BTS will once again be up for contention at the Grammy Awards. BTS was nominated for Best Pop Duo/Group Performance for two straight years. Last time, the ceremony was downscaled due to the pandemic, and BTS went home empty-handed, much to the disappointment of the fans. There are many who criticise the Grammys for not nominating BTS in more categories. Fans who have watched BTS fight racism, ageism and cultural snobbery on the world stage believe that it is bound to happen. BTS needs no further recognition, but the Grammy Awards Show needs BTS to prove its standing.

By SUKMYONG LEE



EDITOR: GQ Korea, Kim Young Jae & VOGUE Korea, Hwang Hye Young; PHOTOGRAPHER: Yoon Song Yi; STYLIST: Lee Ha Jung  
HAIR: Han Som *Bit & Boot*; MAKEUP: Kim Da Reum



## V, tough without being disaffected or combative

When asked if he feels burdened by the love and attention of the fans and the importance they attach to every little thing he does, V shakes his head as if he really can't understand it. "I don't really know what BTS means to people. I appreciate all the compliments and positive responses, but I have no idea why we receive so much love," he admits. V, who has received an impressive set of accolades as a member of BTS—including being the first Asian performer to be named Artist of the Year at the American Music Awards and being declared the world's most handsome man—seems to be savouring these possibly fleeting moments of his youth. However, he doesn't seem to know why this dazzling success has come to him. This is despite the fact that people are continually explaining the many reasons why.

V's exemplary answer reflects the worldview that BTS has established over the years. This extraordinary period of growth, with no end in sight, was created by seven ordinary boys. V continues to grow with BTS, and there seems to be no limit to how much stronger and resilient he can become. "When something eats away at me, I focus on it and try to conquer it. For example, if I'm overwhelmed by some emotion, I write a song about it. When the song is done, whether it's a good song or not, the sense of achievement helps get rid of any pain or suffering I'm going through."

V continues to release his own songs. Since putting out his first song, "4 O'Clock" (a collaboration with RM), V has released "Scenery," "Winter Bear," "Sweet Night" and others. Currently, 15 of his songs are registered with the Korea Music Copyright Association. He is admired for his poetic lyrics and outstanding musical sensibilities—the result of honing in on quotidian moments and subtle emotions.

Born in 1995, Taehyung Kim (V's birth name) had a lucky break when he first met the members of what would go on to become BTS. The next turning point was when they debuted together after a long training period. "We formed a solid rapport because we got our start with a small agency," V says. "My mindset was also very different. From that point on, I thought of my group as a new family." When the Covid-19 pandemic put a stop to offline performances, BTS began meeting fans more frequently through their own platform, Weverse. They share aspects of their daily lives through this platform, and V doesn't like to call this "communication" because somehow that feels too businesslike. "I want to be close friends with the members of ARMY, and I talk to them on Weverse whenever I have a problem or something I want to share," he explains.

To V, BTS is the source of light. "Since I was in elementary



EDITOR: GQ Korea, Park Na Na & VOGUE Korea, Cho So Hyun; PHOTOGRAPHER: Ahn Joo Young; STYLIST: Lee Ha Jung; HAIR: Choi Mu Jin *Bit & Boot*; MAKEUP: Kim Da Reum

school, I dreamed of becoming a singer, but nobody took me seriously. Everyone just said, 'Get real.' BTS made my dream come true," he says. I ask if he feels weighed down by such lofty labels as "the first" or "the best," and if he has any regrets. "Some say that you should keep your first love as a hobby, and not turn it into your job. But I disagree, because I do what I love professionally," V reflects. "When I feel it's not good enough, I'm able to devote more time to practicing, and this helps me develop and improve. Also, the fact that people seem to like what I do makes it very satisfying and meaningful to me."

V sees the world without disaffection, and Taehyung Kim, V and BTS have proved that it is OK to do so—right through from their debut to the present day.

By SOYOUNG IM





# COVER STORY

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## Jung Kook

**From the age of 15 to now, how Jung Kook has evolved and remained the same.**

Over the past couple of years, it has not been easy for Jung Kook (youngest of the family) of BTS to work—even on his hobbies, like painting and photography. “If the stage set is the same every time one performs, there’ll be less excitement for the performing artist and the spectator alike,” he says.

Hopefully, Jung Kook will soon be enjoying a change of scenery. He was thrilled by the chance to visit the UN General Assembly to sing “*Permission to Dance*” in September 2021. “Every time we prepare an album and record a performance on stage, I have the same mindset,” he says. “But there was something extra when we filmed a video with dancers on the lawn in front of the UN General Assembly. Having fun dancing and singing together outdoors made me feel that better days were on the way. I felt that the day was drawing near when we’d be able to meet ARMY up close, or the day when I could go out alone at dawn and enjoy tasty snacks.” I ask whether it is even possible for a superstar to go to a late-night restaurant alone, but Jung Kook smiles and says, “There’s always a way.” BTS has changed Jung Kook’s life dramatically. In 2014, BTS went out on the street in Los Angeles and invited random passersby to attend their free concert. Since then, BTS have skyrocketed: In 2021, tickets for their concert at SoFi Stadium, near LA,

sold out in minutes.

As Jung Kook debuted at age 15, he must surely have matured more than any other BTS member. On the other hand, they tell him, “It’s great that you haven’t changed at all.” What about him has changed the most and how has he remained the same over the past decade? “I was warm-hearted and trusting as a child, and I still am,” he admits. “Until they break my heart, I give my all to those I love. My groupmates all acknowledge this. Sometimes, I worry about what’s going to happen, but I’m lucky enough to have my groupmates beside me, which is reassuring. But if I depended on them too much, it would be like hiding behind them, so I need to be able to stand on my own.” Except for this, he adds, everything from the way he speaks to the way he thinks has changed. I believe that another thing that remains the same is his energy.

As Jung Kook puts it, after an incredible 10 years, what will the next 10 be like? “*Permission to Dance*” contains the words, “We don’t need to worry. ‘Cause when we fall, we know how to land.” I ask Jung Kook if he has thought much about how to land. “But I don’t think about landing. There are lots of things I still want to do. I want to continue expanding as an artist and achieve even greater things.”

**By NARANG KIM**

EDITOR: GQ Korea, Kim Eun Hee & VOGUE Korea, Sohn Eun Young; PHOTOGRAPHER: Kang Hyea Won; STYLIST: Lee Ha Jung; HAIR: Park Nae Ju *Bit & Boot*; MAKEUP: Kim Da Reum

ALL CLOTHING: Louis Vuitton



# The Bold and the Beautiful

**A combination of refreshed classics and bold new favourites are popular this year with traditional jewellery like pearls and gold earrings getting a fresh update.**

By **KAABIA GREWAL & SASHA GREWAL**  
Founders, OUTHOUSE

**T**he virtual power play of Zoom meetings is clearly not over, and as it continues its sweep so will its influence on how we dress and the looks we invest in. Jewellery has always played saviour when it comes to dressing up or down certain outfits and can simply change the vibe.

A simple example is to replace day studs or hoops on a classic day outfit with statement dangles for an intimate dinner

with friends or a special date. One of the trends that is definitely seeing a surge is experimenting with mixing metals. It used to be an aberration to mix warmer golds with industrial metallics but brands and customers are now far more open to playing with different tones, jewellery styles, and colours. Our favourite is arm stacks, where a classic gold-tone watch can be worn with birthstone bracelets, platinum bands, or simply leather wrist bands.



#### **RISE AND SHINE**

Nostalgia marries progressive design in Outhouse's new five-petal Poppi flower monogram. The elegant element makes its way to rings, earrings, necklaces, pendants, bracelets, and the men's line.







# JEWELLERY

TREND | COLUMN

## UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Even stacking is starting to get more creative in the coming year. With digital meetings and conferences, a lot of emphasis is going to be on one's face, and customers keep coming back with ideas on how to layer their earrings. An accessory that glows radiance, multiple ear piercings mean different permutations and combinations of studs, dangles or hoops, ear cuffs, and even stacking rings will continue to reign as a major trend this season.

## INDIVIDUALISM EQUALS INSPIRATION

The most interesting pattern is that of jewellery that lends itself as a personal expression of how one perceives themselves on a daily basis. Customers are investing in a fair mix of classic minimalism, along with edgy maximalism, unlike what we saw in the earlier decades, where one would stick to a piece of jewellery that was trend agnostic and purchased purely as a 'smart choice'.

With changing trends, the jewellery hot-list is seeing a major overhaul from last season, with trends reflecting this moment in time and our collective conscience. Though bright and upbeat, current trends carry the baggage of the past months but with an optimistic, aspirational perspective.

## HOOPS ON THE GO

Spiked, gold plated, and chunky, what's not to love about hoops? The humble hoops have been iconic since the 80s and over the years they may have been squashed down, blown up, stretched out,



geometricised, and what-not. The result: There is one for everyone. We have always been crushing over the little wide variety that would easily straddle a plain white tee or help that dramatic birthday dress go from how to wow. Also, what truly makes these the must-have accessory this year are the little additions such as hanging crystals that catch the light in all the right places.

## CUTTING EDGE

Statement pieces are always in style, ready to break the ice and do the talking for the wearer. Bold, unusual, and elaborate jewellery attracts attention, starting conversations and making statements. Bright, flamboyant jewellery takes you seamlessly from day to night. An entire outfit can be designed around statement pieces with minimalist colour blocking to let the jewellery stand out. Pairing exquisite pieces together can create a statement that is unique to you and your closet, layering until you build a look that is comfortable for you to wear during the day, adding lustre and glamour for when the lights are mellow but the spirit is robust.

## LUXE LANYARDS

It's no surprise that lanyards have become a way of life; they used to be a chic vintage addition to your sunglasses back in the day (we mean 2019), but







#### GET SPARKLY

Age-old craftsmanship comes under the spotlight to create classic contemporary jewellery in 22 carat gold lustre from OUTHOUSE

today, they double up as a cool accessory for your face mask and sunglasses. While there is a lot on offer, the one we love features pearls that are sure to look great from every angle. These chains aren't restricted to the neck though—we particularly loved the super-sized body chains created by Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood.

#### ARM TO CHARM

It's interesting to see how jewellery that we see as commonplace in our culture appear as trendy pieces on the runway. Our traditional baaju bandhs have appeared on the runway this season, reinvented as 'bicep bands', a major nod to Y2K fashion. This trend creates a glorious synergy between culture and history, a more millennial style, and technology, almost harmonising the past, present, and future. Strings of leather, interesting fringes and even tech pouches were found fastened around arms at Rodarte, Ludovic de Saint Sernin, and Tory Burch.

#### LOVE FOR LINKS

Another trend that will continue this year too, the play of interesting chains (dainty or bold). Chain necklaces that are classic yet modern, popular in a variety of forms, from chunkier chains to thinner, flat chains are not fading anytime soon. Simplicity represents a tale of elegance. One of the many factors that make it an It-jewel, right from high street fashion to minimalist contemporary jewellery designs. The iteration of chains in the coming season calls for unique styles.

Chains are a jewellery staple, worn individually or layered in varying degrees of thickness. This year, chains are going a step further, adorning not just your neck, ears, or wrists but your whole body. Chains can be layered together to add more flair to your look, paired with interesting shapes to create almost an armour with bells and whistles that can be also be styled with low-cut necklines or oversized blouses and dramatic lapels. Tom Ford, Vetements, and Rokh were attached to the chain-link while Chanel and Blumarine's body chains were seen to uplift outfits to a whole new level.

Cyberspace that has inhabited every part of our personal space is where self-expression will reach its peak. Using that platform to play out the best version of yourself, to send a message about who you are and what you stand for is a nuanced matter. This is why power dressing, even at home, should be an essential indulgence—a routine that provides a boost of energy and uplifts your overall mood. Define your workdays and slip into your professional role by dressing the part. Handcraft your everyday to gleaming perfection to reflect all that fits and feels right for you.



# TOP TABLES

**Five superlative culinary experiences that whiff magic in the leggo-ed enclaves of chrome and glass Dubai.**

By **RUPALI DEAN**

Dubai's excesses are well documented and food is no exception to the rule. The only problem: the paradox of choice prevails. More options only translate to tougher choices. Simplifying matters, we have filtered the indulgence quotient through exacting parameters to list top five restaurants. The only thing they have in common is that nothing is ordinary and the satiety lasts longer than the drive back to your crib. Bon Appetit!

## TRÈSIND STUDIO

The chic, graceful interiors and soft lighting belies the frenzied pace at which the dishes are served. But, bear in mind, you need to eat about 14 courses in approximately two hours, so speed thrills as well as keeps you engaged. Chef Himanshu Saini is well aware of the potential of his land and its produce and blends the two with inordinate proficiency with a symphonic flourish. The most beautiful and vibrant dish on the menu is One Bite, a puffed-up missed roti, papadum curry topped with cultured butter. In spite of the sheer brilliance of each course in this tasting session, it's the khandvi ice-cream that stands out, and is easily one of the Studio's best offerings, with a flavour profile akin to the delicate Khandvi—delightfully soft with a smoky curry leaf, coconut and mustard aftertaste that lingers beautifully. Dining here is a discovery of an outstanding passion for taste, respect for produce, glorification of flavours, attentiveness of the team and the intent to please.

**WHERE** Level 2, Voco Hotel - Sheikh Zayed Rd.

**USP** Focus is on ingenious Indian cuisine with rich gastronomic traditions. The dishes are fresh, spirited, yet uphold authenticity, often tapping into nostalgia and underlining overlooked flavours from across India.

**CONTACT** [www.tresindstudio.com](http://www.tresindstudio.com)

**COST** AED 1200 without alcohol (Meal for two)







## PLEASURES OF THE PALATE

Table set up AT The Tresind studio (LEFT); Turnip and lamb tartlet (BELOW LEFT); French marigold at Tresind studio (RIGHT) Prawns , coconut curry , pickled tomato chutney, fermented chilli at Tresind Studio; Black Cod at Mimi Kakushi (BELOW); Getting the rice ready (BOTTOM RIGHT)



## MIMI KAKUSHI

Not only is the food absolutely delightful, the ambience is serene, peaceful and the lighting artfully moody. Mercifully, the hum of dinner chatter is less noise and more buzzy soundtrack. Do not leave without trying the beef tataki—a plate of perfectly cooked, tender pink fillet drenched in truffle ponzu and yuzu daikon. Chase it down with sake and you're sorted. If you're here for the cooked food, the kushi Angus beef and braised short ribs with sweet garlic soy are the stuff of hungry daydreams. Be sure to go ravenous; consider yourself cautioned. And if thirst outpaces food, the Wabi Sabi whisky and smoked shitake with Frangelico and Pinot Noir cocktail is a refreshing, and not-too-lethal aside. Another stellar dish is the cold tofu and seaweed salad, with its riot of unusual textures. While the highlights are definitely meaty, there are some great vegetarian offerings too. Mushrooms come swimming in what is essentially a delightful seaweed butter rice with a whiff of truffle.

**WHERE** Restaurant Village, Four Seasons Resort - 23 A St - Jumeirah - Jumeirah 2.

**USP** Go for the cocktails and the vibe, stay for the Ispahan Chawan Mushi with pickled lychee and, whatever you do, make sure the Wagyu striploin with chipotle soy glaze features somewhere on the list.

**CONTACT** <https://mimikakushi.ae/>

**COST** AED 1000 without alcohol (Meal for two)





# FOOD

TOP FIVE | DESTINATION



## VANITAS

The indoor-outdoor space, looking out on one of the city's most prominent water views, is instantly reminiscent of Italy. Highlights include the elegant home-made Pachcheri with fresh tomato and burrata; the creamed forest mushroom risotto with black winter truffle and the show-stopping Tagliata Di Wagyu with sauteed mushrooms and black truffle mashed potato (that's prepared table side) are wonders in their own right. And of course, there is the wine, brought directly to your table from the Versace cellars—delicious and much better value than anywhere else you



## ELEGANT FARE

Vanitas at Palazzo Versace; Insalata di Mare (RIGHT)



might chance upon these vintages in Dubai. The bar menu is a playful mix of old timers and contemporary concoctions that allude to the tropics. Do leave room for dessert, and better yet, combine it with coffee: Caffè affogato is just the thing.

**WHERE** Palazzo Versace Hotel, Al Jaddaf, Jaddaf Waterfront

**USP** Opulent surroundings that make way for an elegant, fresh take on conventional Italian, made from the finest seasonal ingredients.

**CONTACT** <https://www.palazzoversace.ae/restaurants-and-bars/vanitas>

**COST** AED 600 without alcohol (Meal for two)

## PLEASURES UNLIMITED

Five Must-Dos that paint the culinaryscape of Dubai



## 100% CHOCOLATE DESSERT AT FOUR SEASONS JUMEIRAH RESORT

A clean pastry for chocolate obsessives. This is ace pastry chef Nicholas Lambert's exclusive piece, with a dash of sea salt to challenge chocolate's obsession with sweetness. The five feels in this pastry include soft chocolate biscuit, crunchy, creamy dark and a milk chocolate chantilly and dark chocolate sauce. Spot on, it presses the right buttons with buoyant grace.

## CUSTARD TARTS AT LANA LUSA

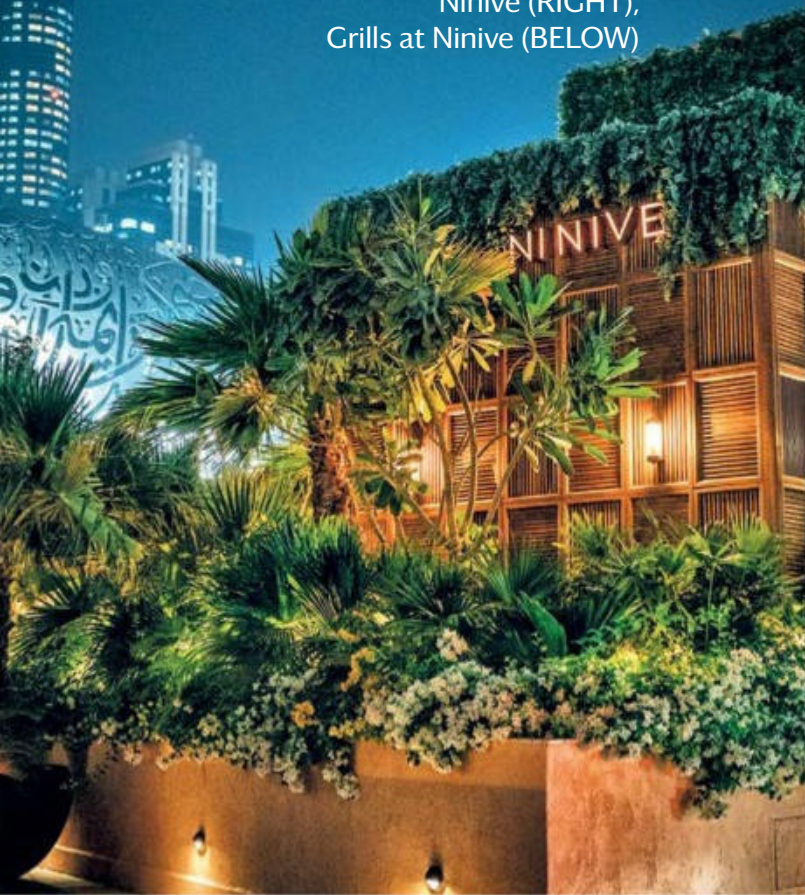
The egg tarts here are a rough four fingers wide and around two fingers tall. The crust is thin and crisp even when cold; the filling is oh so creamy and just a wee bit runny. It is subtle and not overly sweet, a nice contrast to the brittle and crumbly layers of the pastry.





## ARABIAN NIGHTS \*

Tomahawk at  
Ninive (RIGHT);  
Grills at Ninive (BELOW)



## NINIVE

One of the city's trendier Middle Eastern restaurants...No trendiest, this robust space features as the West Side Story of midtown. The look and feel, especially the lam-bent candles that line the bar and the cabanas offer a lovely back-drop to the piquant pan Middle Eastern cuisine, which is having a moment in Dubai. And with good reason, the enticing flavours of harissa and sumac are seduc-tive to ay the least. Every dish is a star, but standouts include the sharp, Zaatar chickpea dip (best scooped up with tandoor bread); tender fried eggplant, drizzled liberally with zingy chermoula, crispy garlic and smoked bell pepper. The revelatory Adana Kebab skewers (yummy, juicy and lusciously meaty) as well as the gloriously sticky halloumi salad with pomegranate dressing are drops of culinary heaven. Don't leave without trying one of the delightful puddings, which strike the right note between creative and crowd pleasing. The luxuri-ously nutty frozen yoghurt is



subtle and urbane, while the deli-cately orange-scented sorbet with the almond kunafeh is somehow both refreshing and indulgent. Then there's the bewitching Turkish coffee milk cake, which makes for the perfect finale to a triumphant meal. The proof of Ninive's success is, quite literally, in the pudding. Finish with a shot of Turkish coffee for that final hit.

**WHERE** Emirates Towers Hotel, Sheikh Zayed Rd.

**USP** Offering a fresh take on sharing plates, the meal is an exultant shout out to a riot of flavours, textures and aromatics. It helps that the food looks as good as it tastes.

**CONTACT** <https://ninive.ae/>

**COST** AED 1,000 without alcohol (Meal for two)

## BREAKFAST TRAYS AT ARABIAN TEA HOUSE, AL FAHIDI

This hugely popular first traditional Emirati restaurant is quaint and beautiful and a must visit for a bite of the local cuisine. Recommendations go all out for the breakfast tray comprising Balaleet aka a sweet vermicelli flavoured with saffron, cinna-mon and cardamom and topped with an omelette, dates molasses, baked beans, cheddar cheese, melted cheese watermelon jam accompa-nied with tanoor bread.



## 36 HOURS SLOW COOKED SHORT RIBS AT THE HILTON AL HABTOOR CITY

The ribs here mean lip-smacking business. They are the moistest, most flavourful, and tender and are complemented beautifully with a range of refreshing pints of beer at the aptly named restaurant Ribs & Brews.



## DAL KA PISA AT THE CROSSING, H HOTEL

This lesser-known regional speciality from Pithora-grah in the Uttarakhand uses lentil and spinach dumplings cooked in a lentil and curd curry with simple and clean flavours that innovatively employ cumin, ghee and asafoe-tida. This is Dubai's new kid on the block, and not a day too late.



# FOOD

~~~~~ TOP FIVE | DESTINATION ~~~~~



MERCURY LOUNGE

Grace, charm and style inform the service at one of Dubai's finest lounge restaurants, which has now become the epitome of fine seasonal dining. On one side, swathed and brushed in Sicilian colour, one can envisage spectacular Insta-moments. On the other, breath-taking views of the stunning, skyline with clear views of the Burj Khalifa and the Arabian Gulf. There's something comforting about the décor: The booths with mirrors and lights and unfussy service; it whisks you to a mindset where Nick Jonas and Priyanka Chopra might just pop in at any moment. Food-wise, the kitchen offers everything from the



RED HOT

Mercury Lounge;
Grilled octopus
(RIGHT); Lobster
Spaghetti at
Mercury Lounge
(BELOW)



classic Grilled Gamberoni, Beef Carpaccio topped with black truffle, Sea Bream, crispy calamari, home-made lasagne to the ever-so-comfortable Grilled Octopus Caponata, peppers, salsa and gremolata. It's the perfect food to go with any tippie. Mercury isn't just a good lounge, but a clever one aiming to showcase food and beverages in a way you never would have imagined. Get yourself a seat and start creating Insta moments.

WHERE Four Seasons Resort, Rooftop, 2 Jumeirah St - Jumeirah - Jumeirah 2

USP The cuisine is both subtle and tasty that surprise with the season. **CONTACT** <http://mercurydubai.com/>

COST AED 595 without alcohol (Meal for two)





A Spirited HIGH

Goa's dynamic culinary and alco-bev vibe has evolved beyond colourful liqueurs candied Port wines and hole-in-the-wall taverns and beach shacks to set the bar high.

By **GAGAN SHARMA**
Sommelier



THE HIGH ROAD
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Paul John's Goa exclusive Select Cask whiskies; Tesouro at Colva with a neighbourhood vibe; The new Gin still at Tamras

FOOD & DRINK

DESTINATION | GOA

It took me a while to befriend Goa. Coming from fast-paced cities, Goa often seems reluctant to shake out of its slumber. When you don't seem to fit in, food and drink comfort and help ease you in. Goa, now on my fifth visit, finally did it for me. Its burgeoning culinary and dynamic drinking scene is kindling a new emotion. Craft beers, gins, and rums, exclusive single malts, heritage tagged Feni, nouveau cocktails and modern diners are driving it to become a cosmopolitan second base. All the while, locals tightly hold on to their colourful liqueurs, candied Port wines, hole-in-the-wall bars and taverns, centuries-old, family-run bakeries, and the life of community and susegad.

City of Gins

The wave that started with Greater Than has indeed gotten greater than we expected. Goa is already home to over 20 gins, rums, and whiskies alone, and many more to come. But nothing's made its way in to the heart and collection of Indian denizens the way gins have: Pumori, Samsara, Hapusa, Tickle, Sequer, Matinee, GinGin, Stranger & Sons have kept bars buzzing with smashing mixes, endless GinTos, helping keep spirits high even when we were locked in. They've all flirted with Indian palates and imagination with a curious mix of botanicals, offered quirky labels that draw from our stories and histories, to quickly become the canvas to draw on. If your favourite gins don't feature on your Instagram profile, you qualify to be deemed a social outcast. So Tamras and Doja, the newest entrants, are giving you another chance. Tamras's visitor's centre is like nothing you've seen



in India before. Its minimalistic design, a long tasting-cum-cocktail bar, posh upholstery, and a shiny still that sits as the crown jewel at its helm is arresting from first glance. It's inspiring others to follow suit with their own tasting rooms and visitor centres, and we learnt that they are. Not just gin, Maka-Zai & Segredo Aldeia rums are taking the myths and misconceptions-filled Indian rum conversation beyond Old Monk—all from Goa.



On the whisky trail

Nearly a decade and a half ago Paul John set up their distillery here. For a while Indians kept craving for their nectars while they exported and collected awards internationally, teasing domestic aficionados with omission rather than submission. But since their Indian release, they've reigned on every parade. Now they've opened their cellars to visitors, luring with mesmerising hues of oak, sweet wort, and bon gout. Only Goa allows the sale of high-proof spirits and Paul John loves their barrel strength whiskies. Some of their expressions can't be found anywhere else but here, deeming it a collectors' paradise. Carry an extra suitcase just to pick from a library of their Zodiac series, Christmas Editions, and Select Cask range. We tasted their in-the-making gins and rums and, phew, you might need to carry two suitcases even!



TASTING PLEASURES

Paul John's tasting room (ABOVE); Distiller Michael D'Souza checking his precious nectars (RIGHT)



HIT THE BAR

MAHE

Modern seafood cuisine with influences from India and Sri Lanka.

Must-Try New York Gin Sour, Cured Mahi Mahi, Coriander Oil, Kondattam, and Sous Vide Beef.

PETISCO

Effortless, quaint gastrobar with amazing cocktails.

Must-Try Fennhattan, Smoked G&T, and Prawn A La Plancha

FELIX

Amazing vibe; outdoor seating

Must-Try Beef Bone Marrow, Wok Tossed Calamari, Soul Kadi cocktail

JAMMING GOAT

Opens to the beach; perfect for sunsets.

Must-Try Grab a Goat-Cha or a Goat in Goa while you're at it.

ANTONIO@31

A homely vibe—classic, comfy, and simple.

Must-Try Order anything off the menu and expect a flavour explosion. The Feni Mule and Bimli Gin Sour will sort you out with local flavours.

MIGUELS

Classy affair with a local touch from Goan and Portuguese cuisines.

Must-Try The Cha Gelato Lemon-grass, Jose Armada, Cavalinha, and Surf & Turf

BOMRAS

A legend by all reckoning.

Must-Try Lemon Chilli Squid, Tamarind Pork, Rangoon Sour, Susegad Negroni, Tamarind Dukshiri





But why in Goa?

Well, minus the bureaucracy, it's the unhindered sources of neat waters, favourable conditions for ageing, a spectrum of locally grown botanicals, proximity to ports, abundant natural influences that summons the craft here, and the people with their heritage.

Above all, heritage is celebrated in Goa, not just through its seven UNESCO World Heritage churches, but also in every sip through their copos. The heritage of Cognac, Scotch, and Tequila meets Feni here. All those picturesque coconut tree lined streets that fill your feeds stand tall as testaments of Feni tightly knitting together Goa's communities that have survived centuries. It was a 14-year-old Dutch spy who mentioned coconut Feni in

his journals, way back in 1545, not much has changed since then. It's still produced under virgin skies, in hand-made earthen pots, sans measurements and scientific equipment. When the Portuguese arrived in India, they brought along cashew trees that bore poisonous fruits that could burn your skin at first touch until they fully ripen. With their patience Goans turned even that into a delectable drink.

Hotels or taverns, feni highballs, negronis, margaritas are everywhere, and it's just so easy to fall for them. Rustic, earthy, at times fiery, umami-driven Fenis are a celebration of the Goan spirit and grounded lifestyle. Hansel Vaz, a local legend, has single-handedly elevated the image of Feni the world over through Cazulo. When



FRUIT TO FENI

The cashew fruit we won't touch (ABOVE); Dukshiri is an exclusive Feni only available at Cazulo's distillery, a must grab

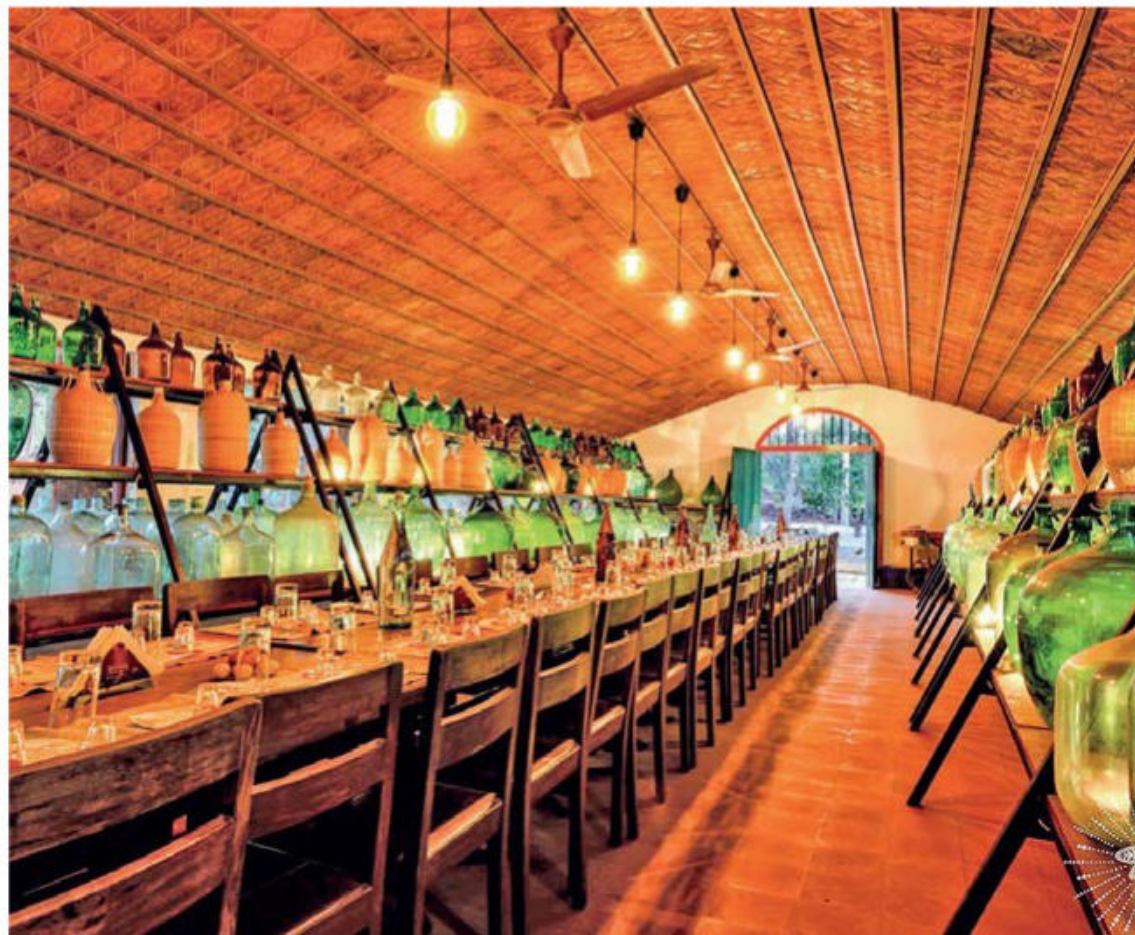
FOOD & DRINK

DESTINATION | GOA

in Goa, a visit to their humbling setup is a must. Witnessing the birth of a Feni from fruit to spirit, in the most unique, rural, instinctive, and nature-reliant way is unparalleled. And tasting Fenis in the middle of a lagoon while countless little fish tickle and pedicure your tired feet as continue your grub crawl on a local spread is utterly gratifying.

Happy Hour

Bars like Tesouro by Firefly in Colva are presenting Feni in renditions that's catching international attention. An entire menu is dedicated to Feni cocktails. But this nouveau neighbourhood Colva bar is way more than that. Debuting on the World's 50 Best Bars at No. 65 this year, Tesouro is a treasure. Don't be fooled by its relaxed vibe, the effort behind their mixes is maddening. Pankaj Balachandran and Arijit Bose are taking Pina Coladas, Mojitos, and LIITs out of patrons' hands and replacing them with niche and suave Midnight Brekkie, Heisenberg, G.O.A.T, and Sal-cette Salsa. If that wasn't enough, they're also part of the team behind India's first ready-to-serve

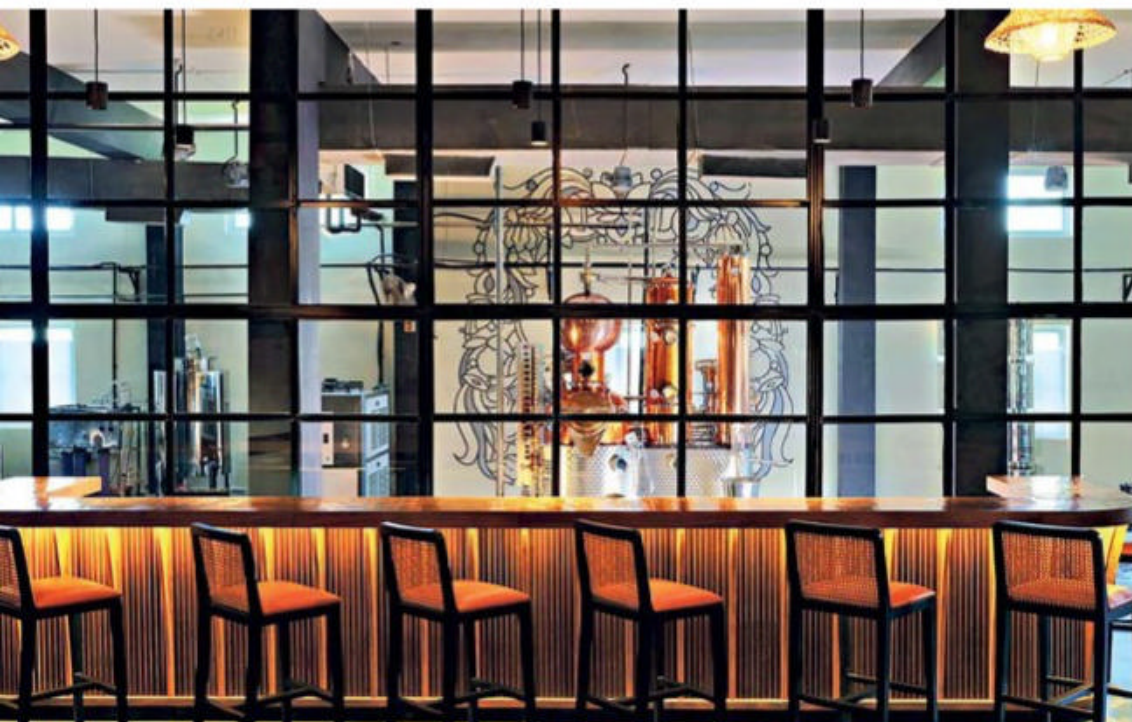


HISTORY BECKONS

Cazulo glass jar museum holds some bottles about 450 years old; Tamras Visitor Centre (BELOW)

Jerry's Cocktails. Now you don't only drink in Goa, you take them along.

Mahe, Felix, Jamming Goat, Petisco, Antonio@31, Makatsu, Miguels, Antares, Saz, Bomras, Cavatina, and so many more have all added to the cosmopolitan culinary culture of the city. And with a diaspora of acclaimed brands and hospitality professionals relocating to Goa during Covid, like Balachandran and Bose, it's bound to add many Michelin-worthy stops on your lists. But all of them don't have to be fancy. Taverns and small classics like Joseph Bar often dot tourist maps. A growing culture of food trucks and Ros Omelette hawkers continue to deliver a local flavour of their own kind. Uncle Chef, Food Engine, Oppa Food Truck, Euseb's Grubhub, Noronha's Corner, are just a few who will spoil you with their beef chilly poee, chorizo pao, roast pork, croquettes and sausages. After a spirited night, you need them for sure, for your soul, and pocket. After all, you have to save for those bottles to carry back home as well.



SKIN IN THE GAME

Here's what's trending on the beauty and skincare ingredients list in 2022

By **DR MERIN LIZA JACOB**

Director & Co-Founder of Green And Beige.

The term 'skinvestment' was coined with good reason. Our skin is the barrier to our internal organs and one of the most wondrous creations. So taking care of it to ensure it is healthy, is not a task but rather an investment. Glowing, healthy skin is something everyone looks forward to, and for this, many of us scour through a range of products to find the perfect match for our skin. Consumers today have understood that there is no 'one size fits all' concept when it comes to skincare since each individual's skin type, and condition will, and does, vary. In addition to this, today's consumers are also hyper-aware of what they put on their skin and are so clean beauty products that are free from harsh chemicals and won't harm their skin or the planet are all the rage.

However, beyond just reading the labels for clean beauty and packaging, it is essential to understand the ingredients that go into creating each product, making transparency a critical factor. To that end, we've put together a list of the top five beauty/skincare ingredients that will be trending in 2022.



Botanical AHA's and BHA

The sustainable and gentle non irritating exfoliants

Alpha hydroxyl acids (AHAs) are a great way to exfoliate your skin if you classify as regular to dry skin and beta hydroxy acids (BHA) are great for oily skin. These can be usually found in products that are meant for exfoliation, wrinkle solution categories, acne-prone products, or even skin tones, etc. Use of pure AHA or BHA are great options in products but have to be used judiciously by regulating the use to twice a week as overuse may lead to a compromised skin barrier. A good option would be to start one's AHA or BHA journey with plant derived AHA like the ones from *Musa sapientum* (banana), *Spondias mombin* (hog plum), and *Mangifera indica* (mango). A botanical-derived AHA is preferred for mild cell renewal and increased cell turnover without causing discomfort. It helps in the production of new





SKINVESTMENT

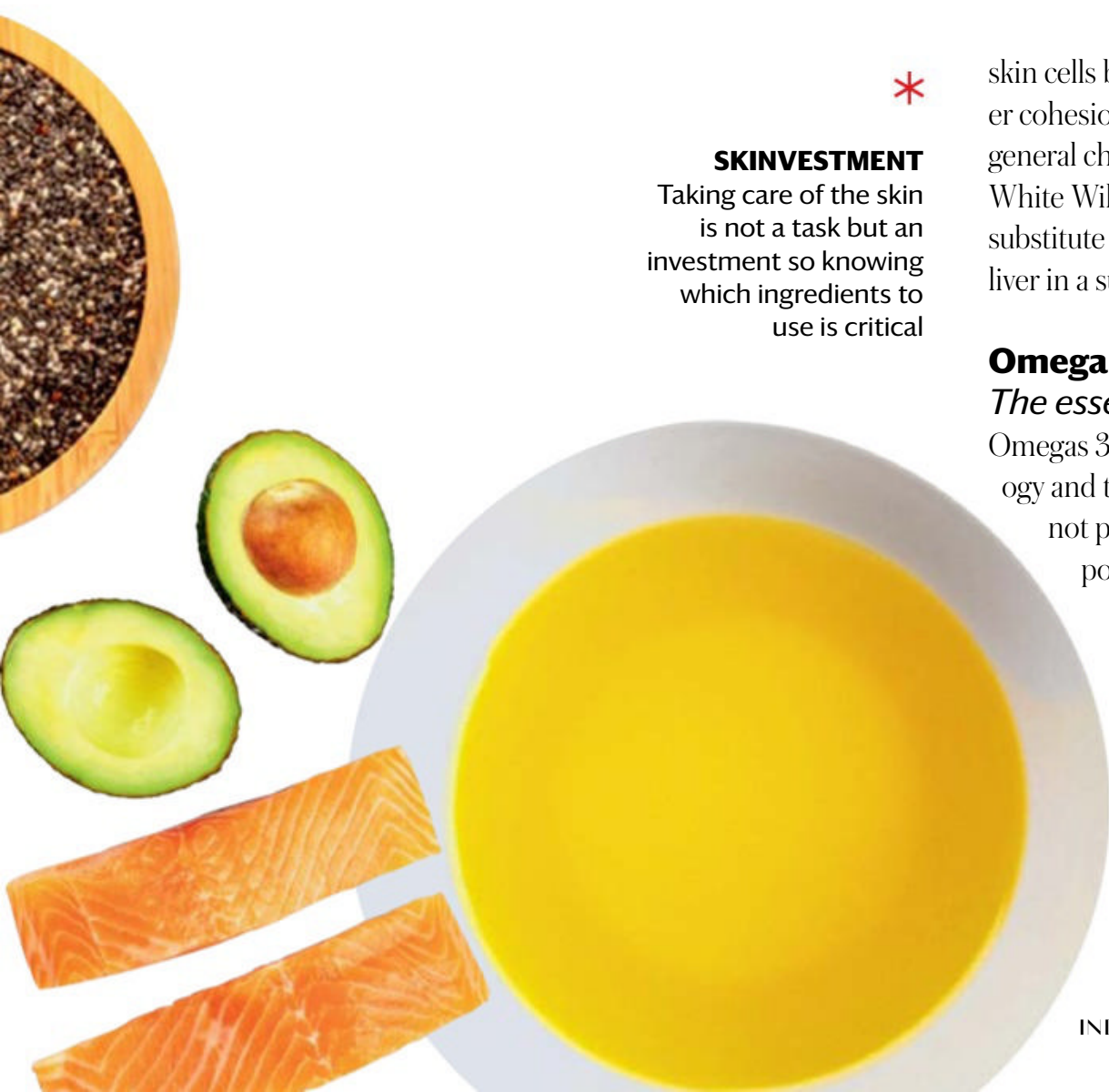
Taking care of the skin is not a task but an investment so knowing which ingredients to use is critical

skin cells but with enhanced barrier protection and greater cohesion between skin cells. It also improves general characteristics of the skin structure. Similarly, White Willow Bark Extract is rich in BHA and is a great substitute to a pure BHA. These may be mild but do deliver in a sustained way.

Omega 3 and 6

The essential fatty acids

Omegas 3 and 6 are essential fatty acids for skin physiology and they are mostly obtained via food, as they are not produced by the human body. Omega 3 presents powerful anti-inflammatory action and prevents hyperkeratinization when applied topically therefore, it is quite recommended as an adjunct in the treatment of acne, psoriasis, and eczema. Conversely, Omega 6 corresponds to the main fatty acid of the cutaneous barrier. Its deficiency increases the transepidermal water loss, the epidermal



BEAUTY

SKINCARE | TOP FIVE



hyperproliferation and, eventually, during long periods of deficiency, it can lead to severely dry skin conditions. Biomimetic emollient in the form of omega 3 and 6 derived from *Helianthus Annuus* (Sunflower) Seed Oil (and) *Zea Mays* (Corn) Oil (and) *Macadamia Integrifolia* Seed Oil (and) *Olea Europaea* (Olive) Fruit Oil (and) *Sesamum Indicum* (Sesame) Seed Oil is a vegetable source of fatty acids and omegas, that restore the hydrolipidic skin barrier, moisturises the skin and reduces transepidermal water loss. It acts as a rejuvenator, decreases wrinkles, and ensures more hydrated and smoother skin.

Xylityl sesquicaprylate

An ally to tackle bad body odour
Xylityl Sesquicaprylate—The smell inhibitor

Body odor is something that most people struggle with, resulting in an experimentation spree, often with products that can cause immense harm in the long run. A skin-safe substitute to Triclosan and Farsenol that are present in the ingredient list of nearly every traditional deodor-

ant formulation, Xylityl sesquicaprylate is 100 per cent bio-based component with antimicrobial activity and deodorant function. Xylityl sesquicaprylate tackles the odour-causing bacteria effectively by controlling its growth without interfering in the body physiology like other standard deodorants that clog our pores in the long run. This is an ingredient that does not disturb the skin's healthy microbiome.

Capsicum annuum fruit extract

The blue light pollution defender

Blue light has not been such a buzzword until recently. This form of visible light from the sun is generating a lot of raised eyebrows on its impact on eyes, skin ageing, and other health concerns. Most of the contemporary sunscreens do not protect us from this form of visible light. Today, with being forced to remain indoors, and at the mercy of artificial lights and increased use of screen devices, our blue light exposure has grown manifold. There is now a growing awareness of the damage that blue light inflicts on our skin. Hence blue light protection is one of the most sought-after qualities in skincare products. This is where *Capsicum annuum* fruit extract or extract of red bell peppers that contain Capsanthin comes into the picture. Derived from the cold pressing of red bell peppers, Capsanthin is an eco-friendly and effective ingredient that has been proven to control the blue light penetration into our skin and even reverse the damage.

Alpha glucan oligosaccharide

Prebiotic microbiome balancer

The pandemic has reiterated the importance of a good immune system for overall health; consumers should watch out for ingredients that rebalance the bacterial landscape and thus strengthen the microbiological barrier of the skin. Alpha glucan oligosaccharide is one such renowned prebiotic that preserves our body ecosystem by maintaining the microbiota balance. It reinforces our body's natural defenses by stimulating the production of antimicrobial peptides, key markers of immunity. It is one of the healthiest sources of nutrition for the healthy bacteria (microbiome) on the skin thereby preventing the proliferation of disease-causing ones. A healthy microbiome is synonymous with healthy skin or scalp.

Knowledge is power, as they say. Understanding the ingredients that are skin-friendly is like having friends with benefits; it perfects your skincare routine to attain that youthful, glowing skin.



POWER OF CHOICE

Almost as important as knowing what to use is the knowledge of what not to use on your skin

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The Swiss High



Pack grit and adrenaline as you swing, spin, ski, jump, dive, and glide in the sanguine Alpine countryside.

By **PREETI VERMA LAL**

I felt my lungs inflate with the onrush of scenery—air, mountains, trees, people. I thought, “This is what it is to be happy.” Poet Sylvia Plath once said. And if you truly want to feel Plath’s joy, head to Switzerland where there’s something for everyone: High-adrenaline adventure sports in Interlaken, panoramic train rides, canyon swings, mountain carts and much more.

ADVENTURE

Snow Park Trübsee (Engelberg)

Why trudge through snow when you can sit on a tube and hurtle down sheets of snow? In Engelberg’s Trübsee Snow Park, all you need is an air-filled tube, sturdy handles to clinch and a loud joyous scream. It is a magic carpet like no other.



No, you need no extra skills. Just adventure in your heart, and a song on your lips.

Engelberg Titlis

Hop on Titlis Rotair, the world’s first rotating cable car, to reach Mount Titlis. Perched at an elevation of 3,238 meters above sea level and best accessed from Zurich and Lucerne, Engelberg-Titlis is the best place for that first foot on a ski. A ‘First Ski Experience’ package here includes ski equipment, a professional instructor, and a lift pass for one afternoon. It’s time for lift-off.





SPORTING GLORY

High-adrenaline adventure sports, panoramic train rides, canyon swings, mountain carts, sky diving, skiing and much more dots a Swiss itinerary.



TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Panoramic Train Routes

Chug through majestic mountains, idyllic valleys, and villages, along crystal-clear lakes and ice-blue glaciers on one of the world's most panoramic rail routes. Must-do train rides in Switzerland include the Glacier Express, the MOB Golden Pass, and the Bernina Express. It's the romance of nostalgia that summons the glamour of slow travel.

Swiss Travel Pass

Buy a Swiss Travel Pass that provides a hop on-hop off access to every public transport as well as exciting discounts on excursions and entry to almost 400 museums free of cost. Download the Swiss Travel Guide app as your personal digital travel companion.



Jetboat in Interlaken

This one is an unforgettable spin on the blue waters. Jet Boat is a super-fast boat that can do sudden stops and 360-degree spins over the turquoise Lake Brienz to the Giessbach Falls with 14 cascades. Get ready to be exhilarated and drenched. It gives a different spin to the term, float your own boat.

Canyon Swing

In the mighty glacial gorge of Grindelwald, surrounded by towering rock faces, an adrenaline-charged adventure known as the Canyon Swing awaits. Leap into the chasm from a platform 90 metres above the ground. Experience the freefall, then swing between towering rock faces at 120 km/h. Professional guides are on hand to ensure safety.

Sky Diving in Interlaken

Ever jumped from the heavens? Try sky-diving that begins with a 10-minute scenic flight in a helicopter and when you soar 14,000 ft, get ready to stand outside the helicopter with your instructor. And then, jump. The parachute will open at 5,500 ft taking you into a gentle flight over Interlaken.

Mountain Cart

In the midst of the breathtaking natural landscape of Zermatt, go down the mountain on three wheels. This is the quickest tour on Mountain Carts from Blauherd to Sunnegga. This 1.6 km route is a must for anyone seeking a huge adventure. A thrill without the spills, now that's leak-proof fun.

Paragliding (Zermatt): Surrounded by 38 mountain peaks over 4,000 metres, the destination of Zermatt–Matterhorn is a haven for paragliders who want to experience postcard-perfect Switzerland from an exclusive bird's-eye view.

For Better or for (META)VERSE

As the lines between the real and virtual worlds blur, we explore five trends in this space where innovations are soaring, and technology evolves faster than tastes.

By **SULABH PURI**
Editor in Chief, GadgetBridge.com

It's no secret that the pandemic put the focus on all things tech. Gadgets and gizmos were found in homes across the globes, virtual reality garnered new takers, cars seemed right out of a sci-fi. So, what now? Don't worry, it only gets better. If last year we saw some good technological advancements, this year we will see bigger launches and inventions.



Bitcoin Becomes Mainstream

In the Union Budget 2022, the Finance Minister of India recognised cryptocurrency, putting 30 per cent tax on its earning. Which earned some backlash, but most are taking it as positive step, as the government has at least recognised virtual currency. This has placed more trust in the currency and additional guidelines around the cryptocurrency will follow soon. The news is, RBI will also bring out its own version of cryptocurrency this year. So, for digital investors it will be a good opportunity and the world might just follow suit.

Tesla EV is Coming to India

The electric vehicle revolution had already begun last year, and with Tesla planning to launch in India, it's only going to get better and more competitive. The Model 3 will be the first EV by the company to launch in India. This will revolutionise



New iPhones— A Notch Above

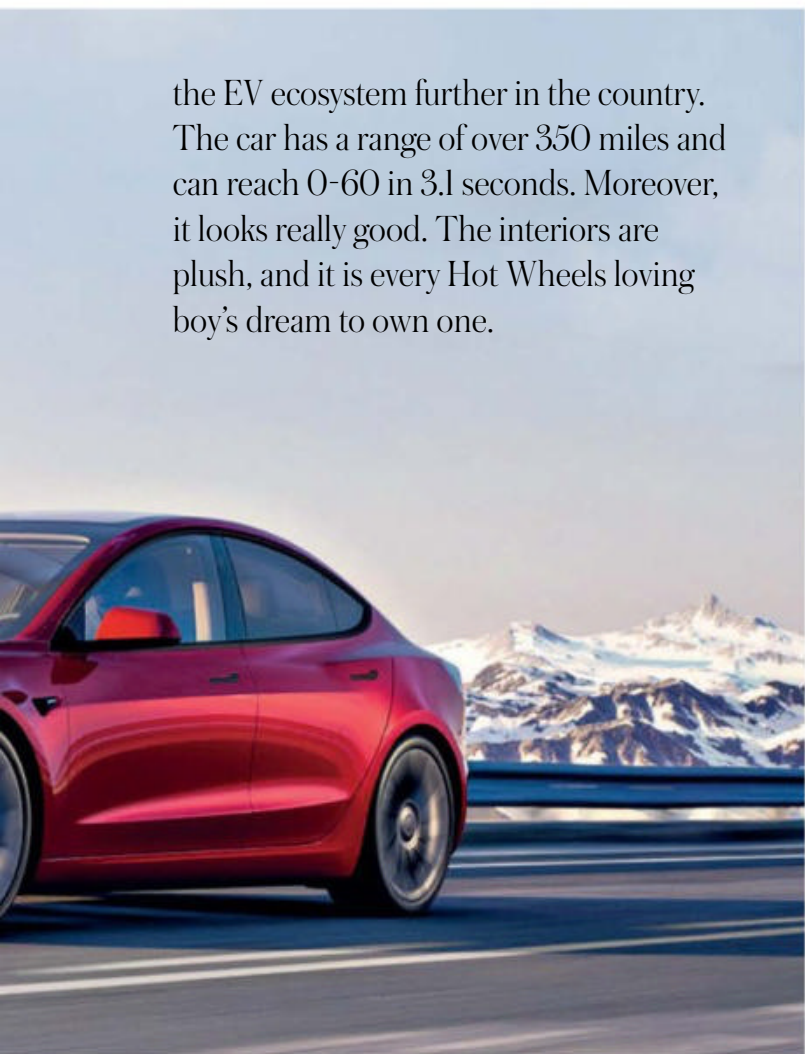
Last year Apple reduced the size of the notch in the Apple iPhone 13 series, but the US-based company received flak for still having it. In 2022 the plan is to give consumers edge to edge touchscreens on Apple iPhone 14 series. That's not all, the internal hardware will be more powerful, and you can expect a fresh new bionic chipset upgrade as well as a more powerful battery. The inside buzz is that there might even be a few design enhancements.



5G, Finally

While the rest of the developed world got 5G two to three years ago, India will adopt the tech this year. Yes, there are many smartphones from makers like Samsung and others already coming with 5G support, one can fully utilise these devices after the 5G rollout happens. The auction is slated to happen in the middle of this year and service providers like Reliance JIO and Airtel are ready to roll it out pan India. With 5G, we can expect speeds of over 100Gbps on a mobile network. Which is faster than most people's broadband connection at home.

the EV ecosystem further in the country. The car has a range of over 350 miles and can reach 0-60 in 3.1 seconds. Moreover, it looks really good. The interiors are plush, and it is every Hot Wheels loving boy's dream to own one.



Metaverse

Facebook changed its parent company name to Meta and that created a lot of buzz. One of the most popular terms right now is 'metaverse'. It's essentially a virtual world made possible by merging several technologies, such as VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality). We will soon live in a world, where we can shop virtually at a super store wearing a VR headset, check out a new car in a virtual showroom sitting at home and more. The next phase of the internet is expected to be 'extended reality', which will blur the barriers between physical and digital existence. Consider in-app purchases, in which users can pay real money for virtual products and services.

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Cat Call

**The Lamborghini Huracán STO is a
snarling panther in bull's clothing**

By DHIRAM SHAH





It's 2022 and while we're busy signing up for fitness resolutions that ought to be broken, the Lamborghini Huracán STO is an all-muscle inspiration to trim down. One may wonder what it would take to strip down a Huracán in order to hit the 1,300-kilogramme benchmark. The answer is simple and inconvenient to everyone who isn't a purist. The STO loses cupholders, excessive carpeting on surfaces, adds a lightened windshield, magnesium wheels, and employs 75 per cent carbon fibre in its entire build. The raging bull has really done it this time with the Super Trofeo Omologato that emulates the real racing feel in a road-legal car.



SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE 5204 cc, V10,
naturally aspirated petrol
TRANSMISSION 7 speed dual
clutch automatic — RWD
POWER 470/640 at 8,000 rpm
TOP SPEED 310 kmph
0 to 100 km/hr 3 seconds
PRICE ₹5 Crore



INSIDE VIEW

The track-focussed interior makes extensive use of carbon fiber

Track and Field

You must bite down on the bitter pill that provokes the realisation that the Huracán STO is basically built for the track. The 'city' label is only an obligation. The highly responsive TROFEO driving mode makes you realise that even a nudge can cause this beast to snarl back, before doing your bidding. The other modes—STO for street driving and PIOGGIA for wet driving—are no less aggressive, mind you. The engine is loud and makes its presence known, something Indian motorists are yet to fully accept in the lanes they share.

Animal Instinct

For the hopeless romantics and loyalists who have had the courage to read on, the Lamborghini Huracán STO is an absolute beast. The natural aspirated 5.2-litre V10 engine ensures that you enjoy a track-oriented power output with great response from the accelerator. I cannot emphasise more on the fact that you have to think very carefully about every move because the car unfailingly over-delivers. The Trofeo

Mode simply sends the car into its wildest avatar. You can fully explore the 640ps power and 565Nm of torque here. The incredible aerodynamics is aided by the double-profile rear wing with three ranges of downforce, ranging from 324 kilogrammes to 420 kilogrammes. On the track, this tends to be your best ally you have when it comes to control and stability.

The true mettle of the STO can and should be tested on the track. The car simply roared through the straights and turns at the Buddh International Circuit. The aerodynamics and superior carbon ceramic breaks (used by Formula 1 cars) made controlling the light and nimble STO much easier, even in the more aggressive TROFEO Mode. The additional down-force from the rear is a massive catalyst to get racing.

The car is almost panther-like, untameable; doesn't let its lightweight dictate its strength and snarls at the slightest touch. It's a wild cat that can reach 310 kmph and go from 0-200 kmph in just 9 seconds. So, you better know what you're doing before touching this exhibit.

Signature Scent

By **CHUMKI BHARADWAJ**

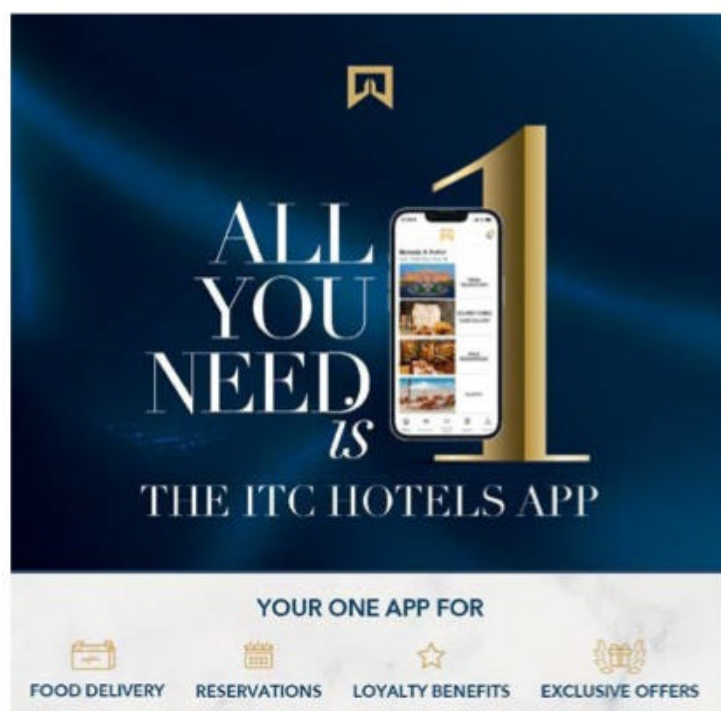
As pavlovian responses go, scent is as much a trigger for recall and reaction as any other. No wonder then, The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts have launched their signature fragrance brand, 'Tishya by The Leela'. This all-new range of exclusively crafted bath amenities celebrates the essence of India and its inherent richness, much like the brand does with its hospitality. The blend of authentic and delicate aromas initiates an immersive sensory experience, inspired by the national flower—Kumud or lotus and the wonder flower, Nilgiri or Neelakurinji that blossoms once in every 12 years. It isn't just a scent but the sensibility that the brand resonates with that is reflected in these amenities, which are 100 per cent vegan, paraben and SLS-free and developed with natural extracts and come in 100 per cent recyclable packaging.



App-ly to Great Advantage

With almost everything going digital in the post-pandemic world, can hospitality remain unmoved? The new ITC Hotels App is a one-stop destination for guests as it enables gourmet food delivery, room reservations, table reservations and loyalty membership management, all through one route. Need we say, it promises to be a game changer for the industry where a one-stop shop is the whole-in-one for the bold and the busy. The app works across ITC Hotels, Welcomhotels and select Fortune Hotels, enabling guests to book their stay at over 55 hotels and resorts through a simple process giving them access to the best rates. Club ITC members can also save up to 10 per cent on room reservations through Club ITC exclusive member rates. Business travellers can book their stays at rates contracted by their organisations via the app making the entire reservation process easy and easily accessible.

The app also enables food delivery and takeaway across 14 cities. You can now order home favourites from their iconic cuisine brands through Gourmet Couch—ITC Hotels pan India food delivery initiative via the App. It allows you to order through a common cart where you can place an order from multiple signature menus in one order,



order combos or curated set menus. To make life even easier, it eases up reserving tables at 75 plus restaurants at ITC Hotels & Welcomhotels with just one touch on the app. Impressed much?

— By Chumki Bharadwaj



DRIVING THE MOMENTUM

Setting benchmarks is an old passion with Rolex and with the Oyster Perpetual Cosmograph Daytona, it references a passion for driving and speed. An iconic model that was introduced in 1963, the Cosmograph Daytona was designed to meet the needs of motor racing professionals. Fitted with a tachymetric bezel and a high-performance mechanical movement entirely developed and

manufactured by Rolex, this iconic chronograph is the instrument of choice for measuring time intervals or determining average speeds. Thanks to its precision and reliability, as well as the outstanding legibility of its functions, it is the ultimate timing tool for racing drivers, measuring speeds up to 400 units per hour, expressed in kilometres, miles, or any other unit of measure. But that's not all, the Cosmograph Daytona's Oyster case,

40 mm in diameter is guaranteed waterproof to a depth of 100 metres (330 feet). It's not only about substance but style too; the middle case is crafted from a solid block of Oystersteel, a particularly corrosion-resistant alloy, 18 carat gold, or 950 platinum. Is there a greater paragon of robustness and reliability? We call it a Rolex.

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